PlayStation 3 · PlayStation Portable · PlayStation Network · PlayStation 2

PlayStation®

The Official Magazine

DECEMBER 08

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A HOSTILE NEW WORLD
A BOLD NEW QUEST

PlayStation - The Official Magazine Issue 13 (December 2008)

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DEVELOPER'S TOP TIPS FOR MASTERING SURVIVOR MODE

ULTIMATE HORROR SHOWDOWN

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- » F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin
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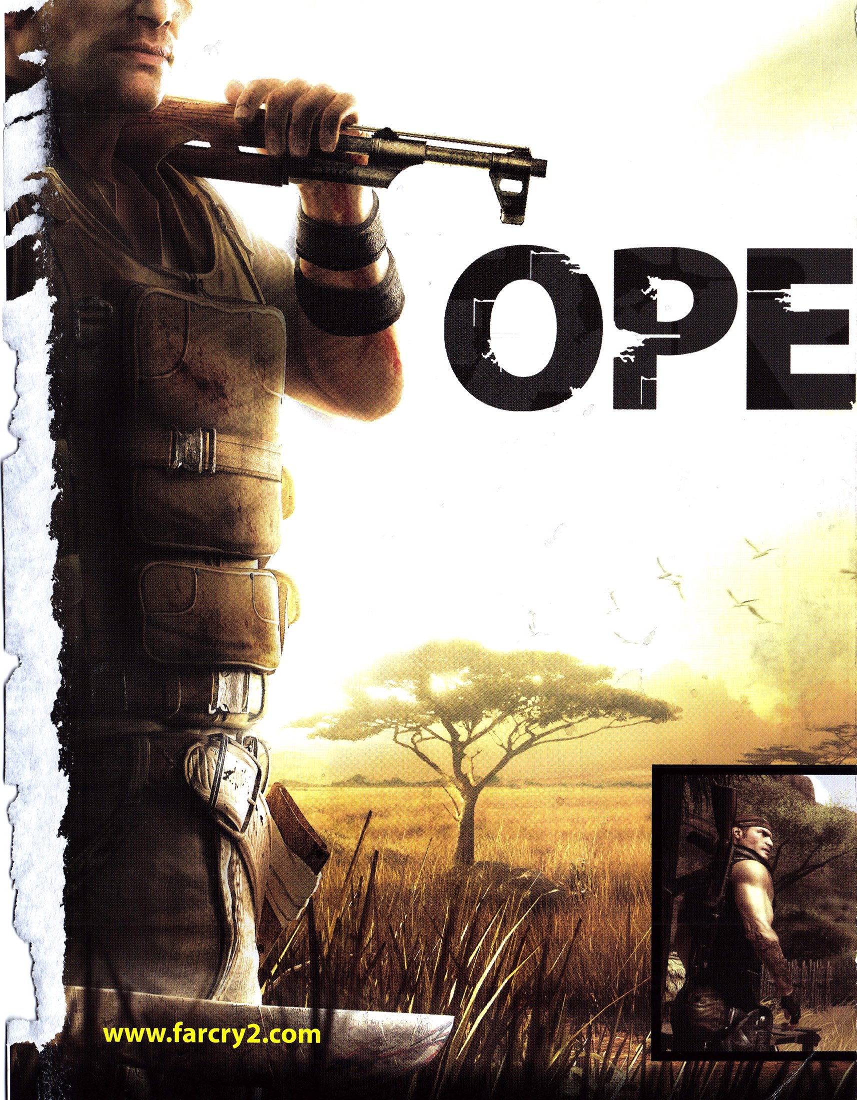
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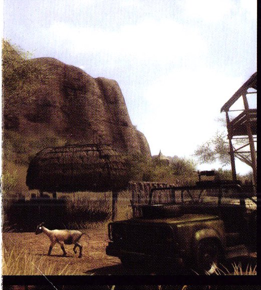

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"This one's going to up the ante for the whole genre"

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"You've never seen a shooter look this good!"

– PlayStation The Official Magazine

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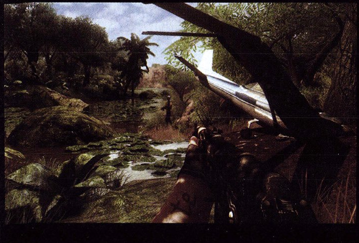
M
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB
Blood
Drug Reference
Intense Violence
Sexual Themes
Strong Language

The difference is NIGHT AND DAY



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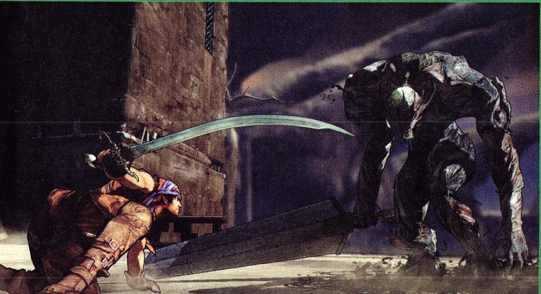

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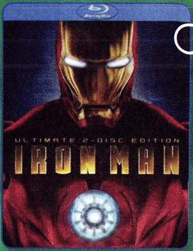
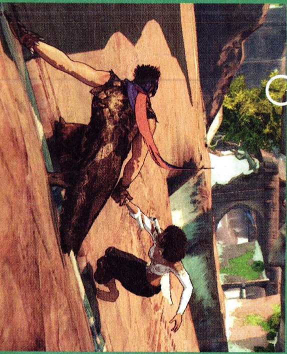
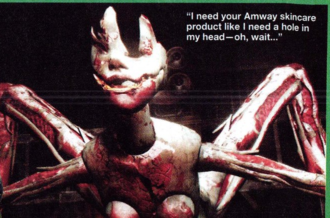




"When you promised to 'rock' my world, I wasn't expecting this!



"I need your Amway skincare product like I need a hole in my head—oh, wait..."

A cautionary tale: When bad catnip meets good kitty, all hell is unleashed.

In truth, this is actually a screen from the upcoming game *EIC: The Fabulous Life of Rob Smith.*

Potty training in Rapture—with the all-fish diet, you need lots of protective gear.

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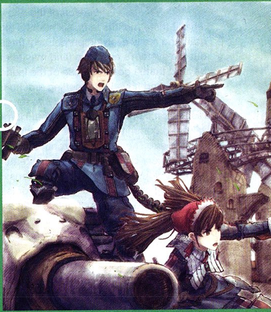
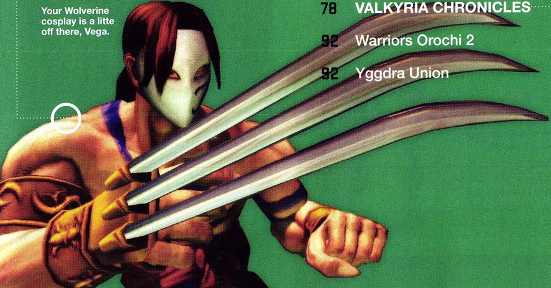


"Hey, you! Reader! Go this way! Untold riches lie in the pages ahead."

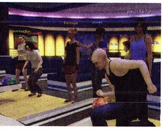


Your Wolverine cosplay is a litte off there, Vega.

Editor's Note

"I hope our little game isn't causing you to perspire."

Certain moments in any young console's life—as the old folks look back in years hence, stroking their long beards—will be granted the designation of "defining." Just a couple of years in, I'd certainly point to *Metal Gear Solid 4's* release as a defining moment for PS3. In one game the next-generation potential of the system was displayed without peer. Its self-referential breaking of the fourth wall (Otacon talking to Snake to suggest swapping discs until the soft comedy that it's on Blu-ray, so not necessary) saw the game makers illustrate what's possible on this system, and not on others. Though you may not see it now, and you may not experience it over the next few months, I suspect that the release of PlayStation Home will be similarly defining.



That's not really a popular position out among the blogosphere and deep in the depths of the message boards. Home's fundamental raison d'être has been unclear at times and contradictory at others. But it's important to consider that the Home you see on day one (possibly around the time you're reading this) will be a much more feature-light version of the one you'll inhabit three months later, six months after that, and really evolving perpetually throughout the system's entire life (and maybe even beyond that.) I got a glimpse of the launch features and have been tootling around in the beta for a week or so as I write this. To reach its full potential it's clear that Home will need committed support from third-party developers. The *Uncharted* room I saw hinted at some very cool game-extending features with a curious beeping object (it means something), random video on a TV (or is it random?), and locked doors that may require collaboration with other users to solve their riddle.

> "The *Uncharted* room I saw hinted at some very cool game-extending features with a curious beeping object, random video on a TV, and locked doors that may require collaboration to solve."

It's obvious, however, that to create a Home location as complex as this will require significant development resources. SCEA's first-party teams can be mandated to build this into their game plan, but the benefit isn't so clear for third parties. For this to be a differentiating factor in cross-platform game releases (as PlayStation Home Director Jack Buser said it could) it would require resource commitment from those dev teams. What, really, is their incentive to create this extra piece on PS3 when it's not required on other platforms? And though it provides a better end-user experience, the broader benefit is as a bullet-point feature addition for Sony more than it is those third parties.

Remember that Trophy support is still slowly emerging some months after it went live, so these special Home features could take even longer. But the commitment appears strong and focused from the internal Sony studios, so give it a whirl, and give it a chance. And let me know what you think of the launch features, and what you want to be first in updates and upgrades in the months ahead.

Rob

"Quote" contest

Enter to win a Blu-ray movie! Unless you're a first time reader (in which case, welcome) you should know that the headline at the top of this column is a quote from a movie. Identify the movie, send your answer (along with your name and shipping address) to **PTOM_editor@futureus.com** with Ed Note December in the subject line. I'll pick one lucky winner at random to receive a Blu-ray movie. I'll be sending one out to Tim Hennessy of Mountain House, CA who identified the quote from the superb *Adventures of Baron Munchausen.*

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EDITORIAL CONTRIBUTORS **Billy Berghammer, Jason D'Aprile, Brett Elston, AJ Glasser, Carolyn Gudmundson, Andrew Hayward, Shane Patterson, Tyler Nagata, Mikel Reparaz, Joe Rybicki, Dave Smith**

ART
ART DIRECTOR **Ken Bousquet**
DESIGN CONTRIBUTORS **Katrin Auch, Brandon Ballog, Gary Liew**

BUSINESS
PUBLISHER **Kelly Corten**
kcorten@futureus.com
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR INTEGRATED SALES **Nate Hunt**
562-983-8004, nhunt@futureus.com
DIRECTOR INTEGRATED SALES **Lee Horowitz**
650-238-2488, lhorowitz@futureus.com
REGIONAL SALES DIRECTOR (Bay Area) **Christina Grushkin**
650-238-2504, cgrushkin@futureus.com
REGIONAL SALES DIRECTOR (South West) **Isaac Ugay**
949-218-0981, lugay@futureus.com
WEST COAST ACCOUNT MANAGER **Rachel Campos**
rcampos@futureus.com
ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE **Benjamin Alessio**
650-238-2324, balessio@futureus.com
EAST COAST MANAGER CONSUMER SALES **Marc Zenker**
646-723-5476, mzenker@futureus.com
WEST COAST MANAGER CONSUMER SALES **Nadine Weiss**
310-424-2254, nweiss@futureus.com
MIDWEST MANAGER CONSUMER SALES **Jodi Sosna**
212-217-1358, jsosna@futureus.com
ADVERTISING EXECUTIVE **Arthur St. Germain**
650-238-2571, astgermain@futureus.com
ADVERTISING COORDINATOR **Heidi Hapin**
650-238-2475, hhapin@futureus.com
MARKETING MANAGER **Andrea Recio-Ang**
arecio-ang@futureus.com

PRODUCTION
PRODUCTION DIRECTOR **Richie Lesovoy**
SENIOR PRODUCTION COORDINATOR **Larry Briseno**
PRINT ORDER COORDINATOR **Jennifer Lim**

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DIRECTOR CONSUMER MARKETING **Rich McCarthy**
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FUTURE US, Inc.
4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400
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Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR).

FUTURE PLC
30 Monmouth St., Bath, Avon, BA1 2BW, England
Tel +44 1225 442244
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NON-EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN: Roger Parry
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PlayStation: The Official Magazine Customer Care
P.O. Box 5154
Harlan, Iowa 51593-0654
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For Subscription Problems Only!
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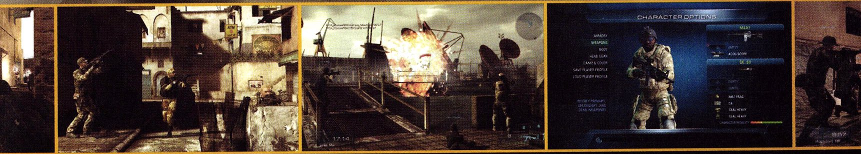
REPRINTS: Contact Reprint Management Services, 717.399.1900 ext. 100

ISSN: 1941-5303
PlayStation: The Official Magazine is published 13 times a year, monthly plus Holiday issue following the December issue, by Future US, Inc., 4000 Shoreline Ct, Ste 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080, USA. Periodicals postage paid in South San Francisco, CA and at additional mailing offices. Ride-along enclosures: None. Standard Mail enclosures: None. Newsstand distribution is handled by Time Warner Retail. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement #40043631. Returns: Bleuchip International,P.O. Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2, Canada. Basic subscription rates: one year (13 issues) $20 U.S., Canada $34 U.S. (Canadian price includes GST (GST #128220688)), foreign $44 U.S. Prepaid in U.S. funds only. POSTMASTER send changes of address to PlayStation: The Official Magazine, P.O. Box 5154, Harlan, IA 51593-0654. Future US, Inc. also publishes *Maximum PC, Mac|Life, PC Gamer, Official Xbox Magazine, Nintendo Power, Guitar World, Revolver,* and *Pregnancy.* Copyright 2008, Future US. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or part is prohibited. PRODUCED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. CPC Int'l Pub Mail #1195484.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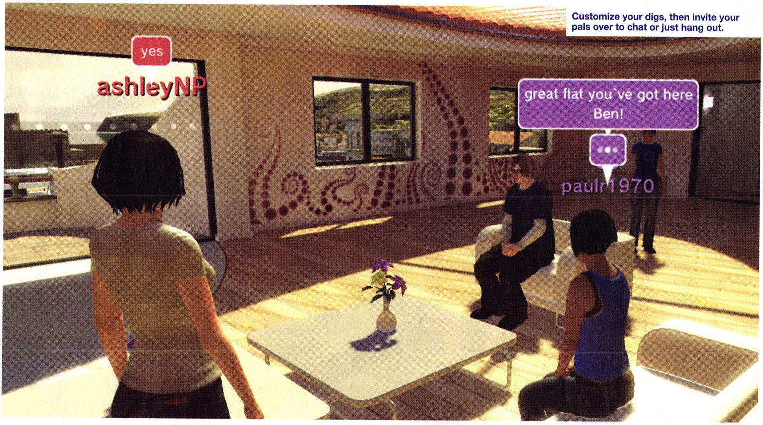


Customize your digs, then invite your pals over to chat or just hang out.

WHERE THE HEART IS

WELCOME, HOME

PlayStation® Home

The free PS3 community hub comes to life

It seems like such a long time coming, but slowly, surely, and incrementally the proverbial kimono of Sony's PlayStation Home platform is starting to open. At press time a slew of new beta testers (us included) were invited online to get a taste for ourselves how the environment works, what you can do, and what you might expect over the long term. One thing's for sure, the Home that you download (likely through a firmware upgrade) upon its still-to-be-determined release will merely hint at what you'll experience after a month, a year, two years, five years, and beyond. That's not to say Home will feel lacking a launch—far from it if our demo with PlayStation Network and Home Director Jack Buser is anything to go by.

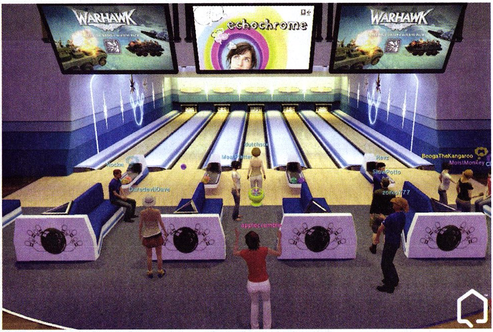
"Home is a living, breathing space; it's temporal," Buser told us of the organic growth and expansion anticipated starting day one. This comment came towards the end of our hour-long demonstration, which for Buser capped virtually a full day of journalists swinging by for the same demo (with at least one more still to do). It stood out because it displayed an easily maintained (apparently as much genuine as marketing) level of enthusiasm for what Home currently is, as well as what it will become.

The Central Plaza

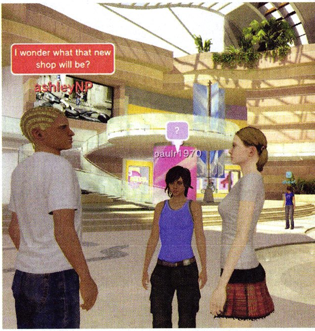
It's true that we've seen pieces of Home in various states of interaction, but now a few of its core functions are clear. You enter the world in the Central Plaza, the kind of location you should expect to see in most major towns if urban planners with infinite space and budget had drawn up the blueprints.

You'll see other folks hanging out, their PSN IDs floating above their heads as handy identifiers. Their appearance will be "gamer casual" based on the free outfitting options (jeans, T-shirts, sneakers, hair-dos) available at your avatar's creation. Most everything you see in the world that allows some form of interaction will contextually throw up a button command option (hit X to talk to someone you're highlighting, sit on a bench you're facing, enter a building you approach, etc.). So you can walk around, mingle, head to the dance plaza and do the robot. (Which will be a fun diversion for how long? We'll set the over/under at 15.5 seconds... then again, there's no accounting for the interests of some gamers!)

Buser was quick to remind us, as we watched him stroll through the various locations, each offering their own distinct diversions, that games



Buser demonstrated how a *Warhawk* game may be started, with all the parameters set within the Home environment. When the required number of players have joined, you launch straight into the game, and when it's over, you'll bounce back out straight into Home.



Navigating the interface is a cinch, utilizing a PSP-style XMB control method to select the Map Screen to travel to specific locations in a jiffy, for example.

sat at the core of Home's functionality. "We're laser-focused on providing the ultimate social gaming platform," he says. It's an important reminder since if Home incorporates such stellar interactivity and entertainment value in and of itself, where will be the incentive for consumers to leave this free environment to go play their $60 games? As such, the *Uncharted* room that was showcased provided much more than a neatly-themed hangout where you could easily imagine sidling up to Nathan Drake at the bar (or, more accurately, Elena). Two locked doors hid what, exactly? Was that Morse code coming from a radio? If so, what does it mean? Does the video on the TV above the bar have any significance or is it ambient background ephemera? Buser admitted that the creation of these gaming-specific hubs wasn't easy, and would need to be patched in by developers in much the same way as Trophies are added to existing games through patches.

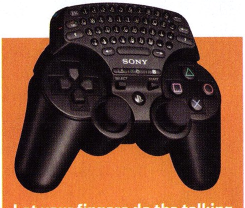
> "We're laser-focused on providing the ultimate social gaming platform."
>
> – Jack Buser, Home Director

Buser also described Sony's position that the development and integration of these Home-hosted game-themed hubs would serve as a differentiator for third-party cross-platform titles on the PS3. If game X supported Trophies and a themed Home space (that could serve as a hangout or potentially offer bonus content, ARG-style promotion or puzzles, and more), would a consumer be more likely to want that game on the PS3 rather than any other system? It's a compelling question that lends credence to Sony's suggestion that Home will help create "stickiness" to the PS3 platform for those consumers still sitting on the cross-platform divide.

Home Hubs

Leading off the Central Plaza are several other hubs, comprising the Mall (buy more stuff to personalize your avatar and your apartment, and expect to see real world gamer-styled brands running their own Home enterprises, though it's unconfirmed if users will be able to craft their own, which we suspect to be highly unlikely at launch) and the Game Space (a play on the old-school arcades where you can hang out looking for folks with similar gaming interests, play a basic pool game, or bowl). The Theater currently lets you sit in those comfortable seats to watch trailers (though we can speculate on the potential for this element: the promotion of Sony Pictures movies, other screenings, even virtual video presentation meetings, maybe). Your apartment (each with its own ocean view!) can be decorated from various options, furniture placed and moved, and provides a secure location for you to invite friends to chat without other folks in the public spaces being able to see or hear your conversations. Though Buser couldn't confirm the number of people allowed in an apartment, he did say that it was plenty! Along those lines, to keep the space tight and populated, it won't appear too massive (no acres of land to cross to go find a friend). When an area reaches a certain capacity, another instance of that location will pop in, ensuring most users can do what they want when they want. If you want to find a friend, just call up their PSN ID and you'll be able to ping straight to them.

While Buser's demonstration was tightly scripted on a specific message, it still implied a very impressive underbelly of features, opportunities, and content that will only be discovered (and then expanded upon) at launch. And that's another question not so much dodged as simply rebuffed: When is it going live? This year, it seems, for sure, and if you happen to be spending Thanksgiving exploring your new Home, we wouldn't be surprised!



Let your fingers do the talking

The controller Buser was using to navigate Home included the handy keypad that will be available in stores some time after Home's open beta begins. It incorporates a thumb-typing touchpad (familiar to anyone with a smartphone and texting addiction) and a mouse pad scroll function that will let you control the cursor around the Home (and XMB) interface. Designed specifically for use on the PS3, it includes quick keys to let you access your Message Box, and other communication functions. The lithium-ion battery is rechargeable through the USB cable, and it's Bluetooth compliant. Expect this to be the standard control device for Home denizens on its release.

MATURE 17+

M

CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Intense Violence

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OFFICIAL PLAYSTATION INTERVIEW

ALEX RIGOPULOS

It's a bona fide gaming phenomenon. Building on the developmental success of *Guitar Hero,* Harmonix branched out to add drums and a vocal track, and has seen gamers (and, critically, non-gamers) go ga-ga over the result. With *Rock Band 2* prepped for release, we quizzed the amiable music-minded CEO of Harmonix, Alex Rigopulos, about the explosive growth and ongoing potential for virtual rocking.

Alex Rigopulos 411

AGE: 38

EDUCATION: B.S. in Music from MIT, M.S. in Media Arts and Sciences from MIT Media Lab

FIRST GAME MADE: *Frequency*

FIRST GAME PLAYED: *Pong* (on the Magnavox Odyssey, age 3)

FIRST GAME FINISHED: Possibly *Zork,* or maybe *Aztec* (the jade idol!), or *Wizardry* ("Tiltowait!"), or perhaps *Karateka* (don't approach Princess Mariko in fighting stance…), all on the Apple II.

FIRST CONCERT: My earliest memory of a concert was one I was in, an elementary school band performance in which I was playing saxophone (barely). But my first rock concert was a junior high school dance, at which some crappy local band called The Fans played. You can imagine how good a band they must have been, playing junior high school dances. But nonetheless, it was my first live rock show, so my mind was suitably blown.

LAST CONCERT ATTENDED: The Who, who just played the Harmonix/MTV party at E3. Good lord, they kicked so much ass.

LAST SONG DOWNLOADED: For *Rock Band?* It was the Red Hot Chili Peppers' album Blood Sugar Sex Magik.

PTOM: You've described *Rock Band* as a "platform" more than just a game. As we head to the release of *Rock Band 2,* how far do you think the franchise has achieved that goal, and how much is left to do?

Alex Rigopulos: I think we've very much laid the foundation. The 21 million downloadable songs that *Rock Band* players have purchased to date is testament to that. But on the other hand, if you consider the entire universe of great rock music that exists in the world, only the tiniest sliver of that is currently available in interactive form, so we have a long way to go.

The game's called *Rock Band,* not Country Band or Reggae Band, etc. Do you see extending the song catalogue into new genres as a natural extension of the franchise?

As you point out, the game is called *Rock Band,* so the soundtracks that we compile for the core game discs will typically be all rock. There's quite a lot of diversity under the broad umbrella of "rock," but it's still all rock. When it comes to the online catalogue of downloadable tracks, however, there's more flexibility to experiment with different genres. I do think you'll see us branching out eventually.

Do you have a favorite *Rock Band 2* track—more so for the way it plays than a personal musical favorite?

Purely from a gameplay perspective, I usually most enjoy the tracks that are right on the edge of what I'm capable of playing. Right now, that's the Foo Fighters' "Everlong" on expert drums and Steely Dan's "Bodhisattva" on expert guitar. They're both still kicking my ass, but I'm inching closer and closer to victory.

If you have personal playlists on your iPod what are the first five songs on it?

Let's see…at the moment, my only playlist is the "Recently Played" auto-playlist. The first five songs on it (that is, the five songs I've listen to most recently) are:

- A.C. Newman, "Drink to Me, Babe, Then"
- Interpol, "Evil"
- Frank Black, "Thalassocracy"
- Raconteurs, "Steady as She Goes"
- Stereolab, "The Noise of Carpet"

When you started out in the music game business with games like *Frequency* and *Amplitude,* did you envision then where you are today with the *Rock Band* phenomenon?

The short answer is "yes," in that the phenomenon that has formed around *Rock Band* is, in most ways, exactly the vision we've been pursuing since we made our first music game all those years ago. At the same time, no reasonable game developer expects that one of his games is going to achieve this kind of runaway success. But our belief that this outcome was possible—our belief in the universal desire people have to make music—is precisely what's been driving us since the beginning.

Any surprise that a game costing over $150 has still managed to be so successful?

Not really. I mean, sure, there were times leading up to the launch of *Rock Band* where we'd ask ourselves, "Are we insane?" But at the same time, we knew that the game was ridiculously fun, and something that could be enjoyed by groups of people together, so we were optimistic that the audience would agree that the experience we were delivering was worth $150.

Are keyboards in the future of *Rock Band*? Or should we expect incremental creep of technology on the existing peripherals and expansion of the song lists?

There are 20 different ways in which we'd like to move the *Rock Band* experience forward, and it's impossible to pursue them all simultaneously, so we have to make decisions about which ideas to put at the front of the line. Personally, while I think keyboard gameplay would be fun and is worth doing eventually, there are other areas of innovation that would probably yield more compelling results in the short term.

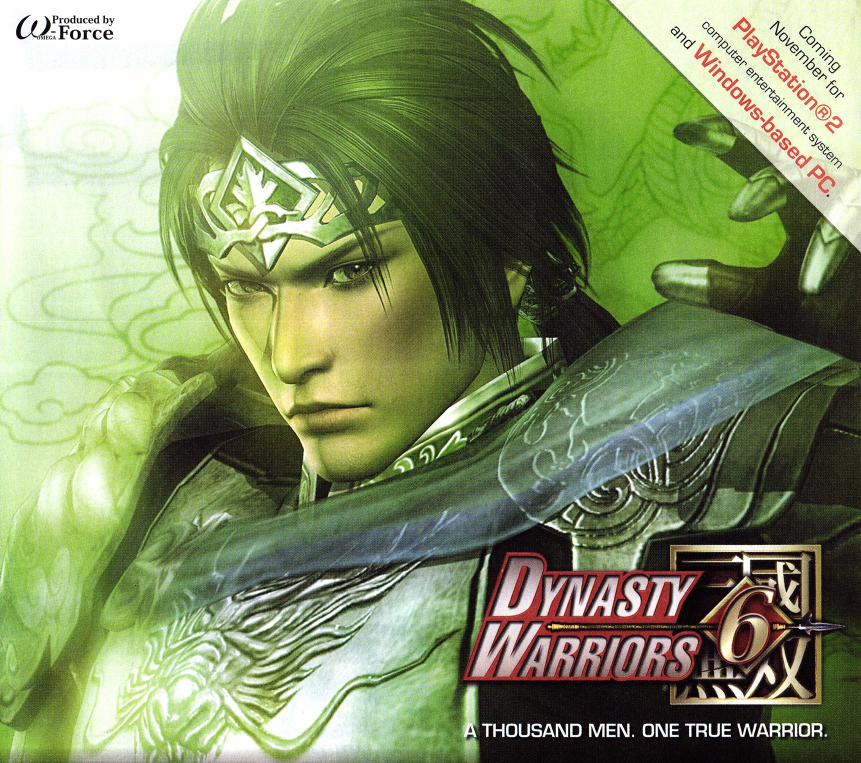
Was there any song, along the way, that you sat in your office, and said, "[insert song] absolutely must be in the game—no excuses, make it happen"?

There have been many. Among recent releases, I would say that the Pixies' album Doolittle falls into that category. I'd been dying to get that music into one of our games for years, and I flipped out when the licenses finally came through. There are some others like this currently in the pipeline as well, but they're still unannounced, so…

What's your favorite fan-based *Rock Band*-to-real-life-musician story?

A hilarious (but inspirational) thread showed up on RockBand.com. A fellow noticed that his local church was looking for a drummer for the church band. He had zero experience as an actual drummer, but he'd been playing *Rock Band* dutifully for about six months. He neglected to mention his lack of credentials when he took the gig. He's been playing in the band all summer and, amazingly, pulling it off; the rest of the band is none the wiser. So this guy posted on RockBand.com to ask the community there an ethical question: Does he have an obligation to tell these rest of the band that he "faked" his way in and isn't really a drummer? Awesome…

Produced by ω-Force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New "Renbu" attack system and spectacular motion-captured fighting moves deliver lighting-fast combos with the look and feel of a modern kung-fu movie.

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Action-packed with the entire cast of playable characters and pulse-pounding scenarios of the original release, along with new stages and scenarios, plus never-before-seen "Musou" mode stories and new weapons.

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PLAYSTATION 3 PlayStation®2 XBOX 360® LIVE PC koei www.koei.com

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PlayStation Digest

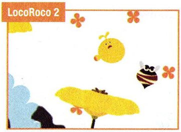
Top Stories, Industry Bits, and Oddities

PSP Watch

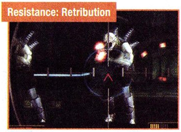
More goodies coming very soon

If you haven't yet played *Patapon* or *LocoRoco,* you'd better bust out your PSP and stop by your local game retailer, right this second, because the sequels for those two quirky, visually delightful, and highly recommended titles are just around the corner. Also, if you haven't had a chance to blast through *Super Stardust* or *Everyday Shooter* on the PS3, you'll have another opportunity when they're released on the PSP in the near future (we'll let you know when exact dates are pinned down). Oh, and don't forget, *Resistance: Retribution* comes out next spring.

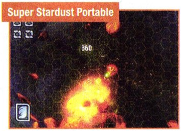
Can you really resist these adorable LocoRoco? They're so...earnest!



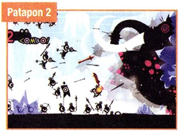
LocoRoco 2



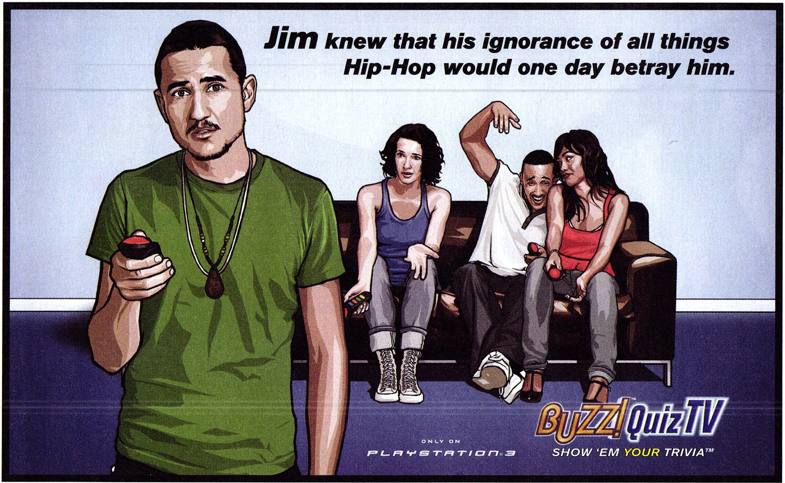
Resistance: Retribution



Super Stardust Portable



Patapon 2


Jim knew that his ignorance of all things Hip-Hop would one day betray him.
BUZZ! Quiz TV
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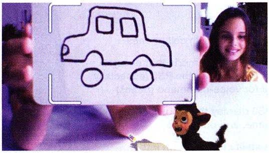
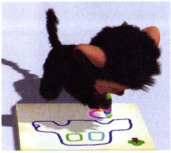
Allergic to Animals? Get an EyePet!

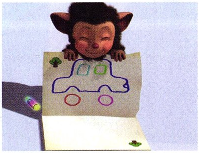
Okay, so this lovable monkey creature is only announced for the PAL region so far, but we're hoping that changes...and soon! The critter will reside in your TV screen, but via the PlayStation Eye, he'll respond to touch, sound, foreign objects, and more. Best of all, if you draw a picture and hold it up to the Eye, it'll come to life and your pet will be able to play with it! Even Rob's cold, cold heart melted a little when he saw the feisty little guy.



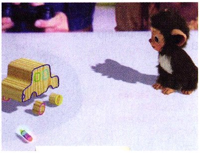
1. Draw a picture.



2. Your EyePet will draw his version of your picture, in prettier colors.



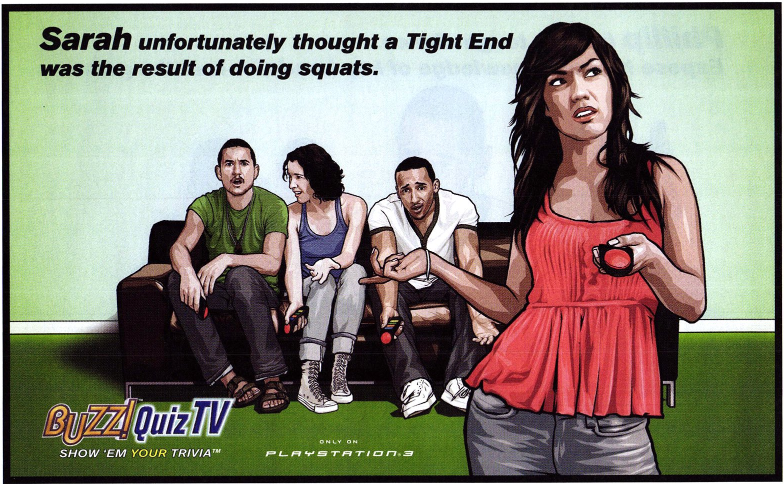
3. He did such a great job! Aren't you proud of him?



4. Then, your image will pop into 3D and interact with your pet!

Re:Make

NIS and Atlus aren't the only RPG powerhouses still loving the PS2. Square Enix recently announced a fully 3D port of a former Gameboy Advance exclusive, now titled *Kingdom Hearts Re:Chain of Memories,* due out this December. With a card-based battle system and a host of Disney and *Final Fantasy* characters, *Re:Chain* bridges the gap between the first and second *Kingdom Hearts* adventures.


Sarah unfortunately thought a Tight End was the result of doing squats.
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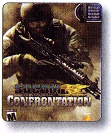
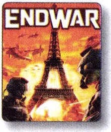
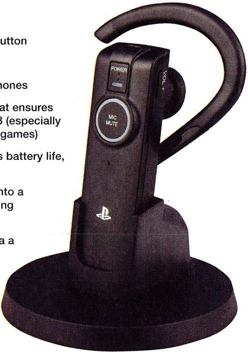
Still Need a Bluetooth Headset?

If so, consider Sony's Official Bluetooth Headset, which features:





- An easy-to-press Mute button
- A charging cradle
- Compatibility with cell phones
- A "high-quality" mode that ensures clearer input into the PS3 (especially vital for voice-command games)
- A PS3 display that shows battery life, volume, and other info
- The ability to transform into a desktop mic while charging (just set it in its cradle)
- Automatic PS3 pairing via a USB cable

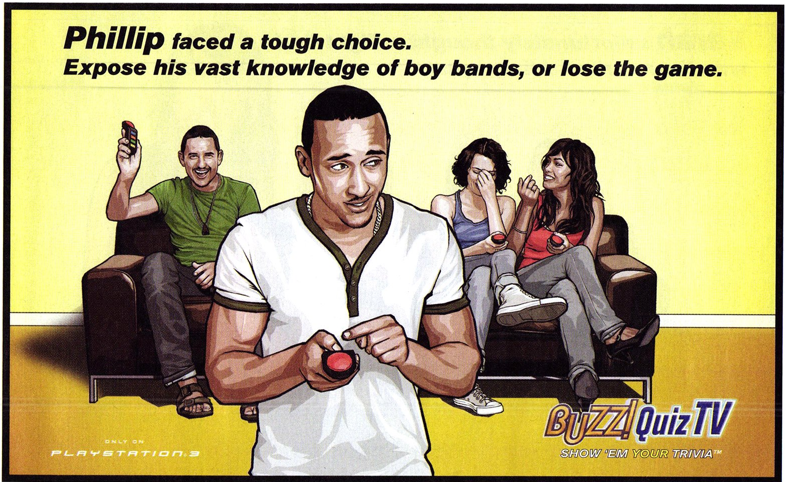


Convinced? You can buy it standalone this fall for $49.99, bundled with *SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Confrontation* for $59.99, or paired with the Limited Edition of *Tom Clancy's EndWar* for $89.99.

LONG LIVE PLAYSTATION

ACTIVISION BLIZZARD

Sony's not the only company that's confident PlayStation consoles will have long, fruitful lives—Activision Blizzard has faith, too! At its Analyst Day, Activision Blizzard's CEO, Robert Kotick, said, "I think there's a long life ahead of us. We're in year eight of PlayStation 2, and when you look at PlayStation 3 technically, we're likely to see at least eight years' success." Good to hear that the CEO of (arguably, if you're EA) the world's biggest videogame publisher believes in the PS3 as much as we do!


Phillip faced a tough choice.
Expose his vast knowledge of boy bands, or lose the game.

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TOP10LIST

What we're playing, watching, reading, and consuming this month. And why we all need to get second jobs with Christmas coming.

Impaler | Comic | $14.99
This new trade paperback finishes up the first chapter of a story that began with three single issues released under Image Comics in 2006-07 (and nominated for an International Horror Guild award). Rob says it's a suitably gruesome story of Vlad the Impaler's return to modern-day terror...with a terrific twist. It's written by former Future editor William Harms, who's now at Sucker Punch writing the story for the upcoming *inFamous.* Shout out to Billy!

Sea Salt & Pepper Cashews | Food | $6
Ten ounces of, as the marketing blurb tells us, "Natural Energy for that 3pm Slump," turns out to be a big hit at PTOM Towers. Yep, the Emerald Nuts folks proved once more that this wholesome snack is the ideal gamer-powering foodstuff. Tangy, tasty, and free to Rob (and the rest of us, when he shares).

Enviga | Beverage | $1.49
Energy drinks are so last year. For the fit gamer, Gary wholeheartedly recommends his new favorite: Enviga. This lovely libation is a sparkling green tea beverage, with the same amount of caffeine as a cup of joe along with a healthy dose of EGCG, a potent antioxidant. Apparently, Enviga can boost your metabolism and help burn calories, which gives us an excuse to sit on our butts and play games even longer.

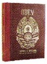
Watchmen | Graphic Novel | $19.99
True story: On a flight back from Montreal, Gary was reading *Watchmen,* a classic literary superhero comic that he finally picked up now that the movie is in production. The young gal to his right noticed the comic and mentioned how much she enjoyed it, and that she even studied it in a college course. "It's set during some important time, something big..." she muttered. "The Cold War?" Gary responded. "Yeah, that's it!" Is Gary really getting that old? (Yes.)

Death Note, Vol. 1 (Collector's Edition) | Manga | $19.99
If you write someone's name in the "Death notebook," they'll die of a heart attack within minutes… Teresa is savoring this clever, morally twisted tale about a high school honor student who finds—and uses—the book and the mysterious detective hunting him down. We're a bit concerned about Teresa's new "work notebook" now.

Freaks and Geeks | TV | $39
With pilot season in full swing, Scott can't help but reminisce about his favorite discontinued TV series: *Freaks and Geeks.* A hilarious and painfully real portrayal of high school life in the early '80s, this show should appeal to those who didn't, um, "fit in" during those awkward teenage years—like our, ahem, older staff members.

Reconstruction Site | Music | $10
With all the letters we get from Canadian readers, Scott thought it appropriate to plug Canadian band The Weakerthans. Formed by soft-spoken frontman John K. Samson just over a decade ago, this indie rock act pulls from an eclectic selection of influences (mandatory for "indie" cred) to create some catchy and heartfelt tunes.

Trek Soho | Bicycle | $1,000
For Ken, cycling to work is a great excuse to drop an unnecessary $1K on a new bike. This urban/cross bike is commuter ready with fenders, disc brakes, and a funky new belt system like they have on motorcycles and snowmobiles. (So let's get this straight, Ken…you have to move your legs to get it to move? Weird.)



Obey: Supply & Demand: The Art of Shepard Fairey | Book | $59.95
Since we're a little game-centric at PTOM, we rely on Ken to cultivate our appreciation of culture. Ken's currently on an art kick (surprise), touting a beautiful, large format 350-page encyclopedia of pop urban artist Shepard Fairey's Obey Giant work. It includes previously unreleased images, essays and interviews, and more.

Skippy Roasted Honey Nut Super Chunk Peanut Butter | Food | $4
Roger's not a *huge* peanut butter fan, but mix in scads of honey and peanuts and he's hooked. Since local stores don't carry this particular variety, Roger travels many miles to replenish his stock. Oh, the looks he endures when he plops down his case of peanut butter at the register…along with his lime Jello, Cool Whip, and Vaseline.

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TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Alcohol Reference
Mild Blood
Mild Suggestive Themes
Mild Violence

PLAYSTATION Network

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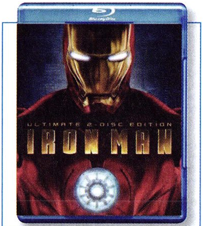
Blu-ray Central

Date movies?! Gamers get dates?

The summer rush hits again, right as summer is ending! Great popcorn movies, a surreal art film, hilarious comedies, creepy horror, and a bad barbarian movie. Can life get better? I submit that it cannot. Jason D'Aprile (PTOM_bluray@futureus.com)



PlayStation: The Official Magazine
PICK OF THE MONTH

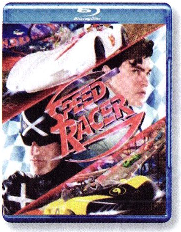
Iron Man

PRICE: $39.99 **RATED:** PG-13

| MOVIE | Easily one of this summer's best, *Iron Man* is a great action movie that works its magic for comic fans and non-fans alike. Robert Downey Jr. is pitch-perfect as the womanizing, alcoholic Tony Stark, and Jon Favreau is proving to be one Hollywood's best new wave directors.

| EXTRAS | No commentary or extended cuts, but there are two discs full of hi-def deleted scenes, documentaries about the making of the movie and the history of the character, and a fair bit about Robert Downey Jr. None of the extras are as amazing as the movie, but the second disc rounds out a great presentation.

MOVIE ★★★★★
EXTRAS ★★★



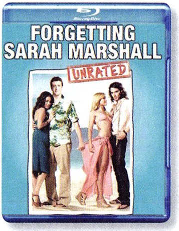
Speed Racer

PRICE: $35.99 **RATED:** PG-13

| MOVIE | Despite *Speed Racer's* poor box office performance, it's a gorgeous homage to Saturday morning cartoons and childhood—it's hard to imagine a more wonderful ode to being a 12-year-old boy. Every scene in the movie—from the awe-inspiring races to maniacal tirades of the villain—is a joy to watch, and its one of the best hi-def experiences you'll find.

| EXTRAS | The extras are surprisingly bad. There's a decent making-of documentary, along with a kid-friendly look at the set, a short and pointless look at the cars, and a horrible DVD game that brings back unwanted memories of the Sega CD.

MOVIE ★★★★½
EXTRAS ★★



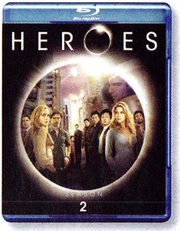
Forgetting Sarah Marshall

PRICE: $39.98 **RATED:** PG-13

| MOVIE | Since his success with *The 40-Year-Old Virgin,* Judd Apatow's name has been appearing on a lot of comedies that don't measure up. Thankfully, this isn't one of them. Hilarious, over-the-top, and with whip-smart dialogue, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* is firmly rooted in the tenets that make a great adult comedy, and belongs in your collection right beside *Superbad* and *Knocked Up.*

| EXTRAS | There's an overwhelming variety of hilarious extras on the disc. Outtakes, fake TV show promos, music videos, and a touching serenade to the letter "U" to name a few, make this the best collection of extras since *Walk Hard.*

MOVIE ★★★★
EXTRAS ★★★★½



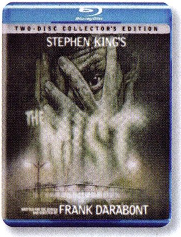
Heroes Seasons 1 and 2

PRICE: $99.90/$69.90 **RATED:** PG-13

| MOVIE | Proving that TV superhero drama can be done without camp or alienating non-geek viewers, *Heroes* is a bit slow-paced and overweight with characters (and Season 2 didn't live up to Season 1), but it's still incredibly involving and entertaining. Both discs have a stunning presentation, putting the broadcast quality to shame.

| EXTRAS | Easily the most in-depth set of TV show extras we've seen with commentaries, art galleries, making-of shorts, all the Internet-posted content, deleted scenes, alternate openings and endings, and BD-Live support for when Universal gets around to adding content.

MOVIE ★★★★
EXTRAS ★★★★



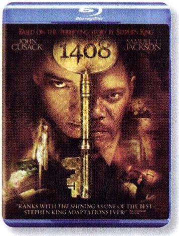
The Mist

PRICE: $34.95 **RATED:** PG-13

| MOVIE | *The Mist* is a great monster movie ruined by a horrible, unnecessarily foul ending. This is a shame, as otherwise it's one of the more memorable translations of Stephen King's work. Like most horror, the monsters are seldom the real evil, and *The Mist* is heavy on the psychological build up of tension. The monsters look great too, but when the end comes, most viewers (particularly parents) will be left with such a foul taste in their mouths that they'll wish they hadn't bothered.

| EXTRAS | *The Mist* comes with genuinely interesting making-of style extras, including solid director's commentary, deleted scenes, and a fun conversation between the director and Stephen King. The most interesting extra, however, is a second disc that contains a black-and-white version of the movie. This seems odd, but *The Mist* actually works better in this pristinely-sharp, even moodier version.

MOVIE ★★★½
EXTRAS ★★★½


Blu-ray Disc
BASED ON THE TERRIFYING STORY BY STEPHEN KING
JOHN CUSACK
SAMUEL L. JACKSON
1408
"RANKS WITH THE SHINING AS ONE OF THE BEST STEPHEN KING ADAPTATIONS EVER"

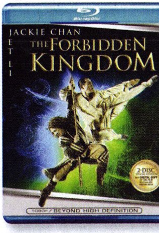
1408

PRICE: $29.95 **RATED:** PG-13

| MOVIE | This month's second movie based on a Stephen King short story is great looking, showcases fine performances, and is fun for an evening of creepiness. Yet, it doesn't spend enough time fleshing out the true main character—the room itself. John Cusack delivers his usual acting range of cynical confusion, and is engaging in the role of a non-believing writer. The script just doesn't use his cynicism nearly enough and there's only a mere nod given to the history of the room, or why it exists at all.

| EXTRAS | Alternate endings, deleted scenes, and plenty of making-of bits are the par-for-the-course extras. The director and writers' commentary track is surprisingly engaging as well, so if you're a fan you'll appreciate the background information.

MOVIE ★★★½
EXTRAS ★★★½



The Forbidden Kingdom

PRICE: $39.99 **RATED:** PG-13

| MOVIE | When martial arts lovers heard that Jackie Chan and Jet Li would be in a movie together, this probably wasn't what they had envisioned. The previews hid the fact that *The Forbidden Kingdom* is actually about some damn white boy who gets sucked into ancient China and must learn *gung fu* to save the realm. Thankfully, Li and Chan get plenty of fighting screen time and the movie manages to be a fun homage to the genre.

| EXTRAS | *The Forbidden Kingdom* is packed with featurettes that pay homage to its Chinese progenitors. The commentary reveals the director's love of old Kung Fu flicks, and blooper and deleted scenes round out a fun package. Most interesting is the use of BD-Live, which includes an in-depth program that lets you plaster the screen with graphics, text, and animation, then share it with others. Although completely pointless, it's the first attempt we've seen at an interactive online experience.

MOVIE	★★★
EXTRAS	★★★

Blu-ray Disc
"MAGNIFICENT"
The Fall
R
EXPERIENCE HIGH DEFINITION

The Fall

PRICE: $38.96 **RATED:** R

| MOVIE | *The Fall* belies immediate explanation. The offspring of Terry Gilliam and Guillermo Del Toro, the narrative focuses on an outlandish tale told on the fly by a crippled and depressed stuntman to a barely literate child in an LA hospital during the movie industry's infancy. The tale, however, is really there to amaze you with visuals, as it morphs regularly and without much regard to details. The real plot is, much like *Pan's Labyrinth,* about the cold reality of adult and child worlds colliding. The acting is amazing and the film itself is beautiful and tragic. Why it's rated R, however, is a complete mystery.

| EXTRAS | The commentary is the most fascinating extra, since this is a movie that deserves further explanation. The featurettes are worth watching, and help increase the appreciation of what an undertaking *The Fall* was to make. BD-Live support is included, and includes a photo gallery to peruse along with downloadable previews.

MOVIE	★★★★
EXTRAS	★★★½

Blu-ray Disc
TRANSFORMERS
TWO-DISC SPECIAL EDITION

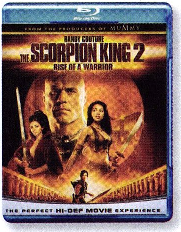
Transformers

PRICE: $39.99 **RATED:** PG-13

| MOVIE | By now, you've seen it, but *Transformers* on Blu-ray is definitely worth a second look. Sure, the plot is inane, the human characters both extraneous and stupid (but Megan Fox…), and very little makes sense, but the robots—the glorious robots—make it all worthwhile. The hi-def transfer is also one of the best you're likely to experience.

| EXTRAS | With a second disc of making-of goodies, *Transformers* fans will find plenty to browse. You can watch the movie with picture-in-picture commentary and BD-Live enabled character info, take a closer look at all the robots models, and there are multi-part documentaries about the Earth and robot sides of the story. Most entertaining is Michael Bay's commentary: Bay is clearly a man who loves himself, and has no problem sharing his greatness with you.

MOVIE	★★★½
EXTRAS	★★★


Blu-ray Disc
FROM THE PRODUCERS OF MUMMY
RANDY COUTURE
THE SCORPION KING 2
RISE OF A WARRIOR
THE PERFECT HI-DEF MOVIE EXPERIENCE

Scorpion King 2: Rise of a Warrior

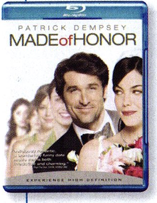
PRICE: $39.98 **RATED:** PG-13

| MOVIE | If the original *Scorpion King* was too intellectual for you, they've gone and made a straight-to-video sequel that kills that problem dead. A barbarian movie for tweeners, filled with pretty young people in garb that smacks of medieval homeless chic, *Rise of a Warrior* will make older viewers pine for the R-rated Grade-Z fantasy movies of the '80s. Sure this one has cheesy special effects and bad acting, but you don't get the gratuitous sex and violence to temper the other flaws. Conan the Barbarian, where are you?

| EXTRAS | It should tell you something about how much faith the studio had in this straight-to-video sequel when they don't include any extras at all.

MOVIE	★½
EXTRAS	

DATE MOVIE CORNER



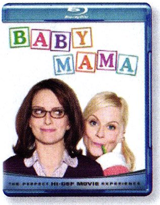
Made of Honor

PRICE: $38.96 **RATED:** PG-13

| MOVIE | There's nothing original or surprising about this by-the-numbers romantic comedy, which makes it perfect date movie fodder. The two leads lack any real chemistry but the jokes are plentiful, and you'll overdose on eye candy and cuteness. It's harmless fare to be sure, but a great reason to cuddle on the couch.

| EXTRAS | This romantic comedy has a surprisingly deep package of extras. The director's commentary is one of the more interesting tracks. Beyond that, the chick-friendly factor kicks in with shorts on the three weddings in the movie, along with deleted scenes, and a making-of featurette. There is BD-Live support, but it merely points to a website where you can download previews.

MOVIE	★★★½
EXTRAS	★★★



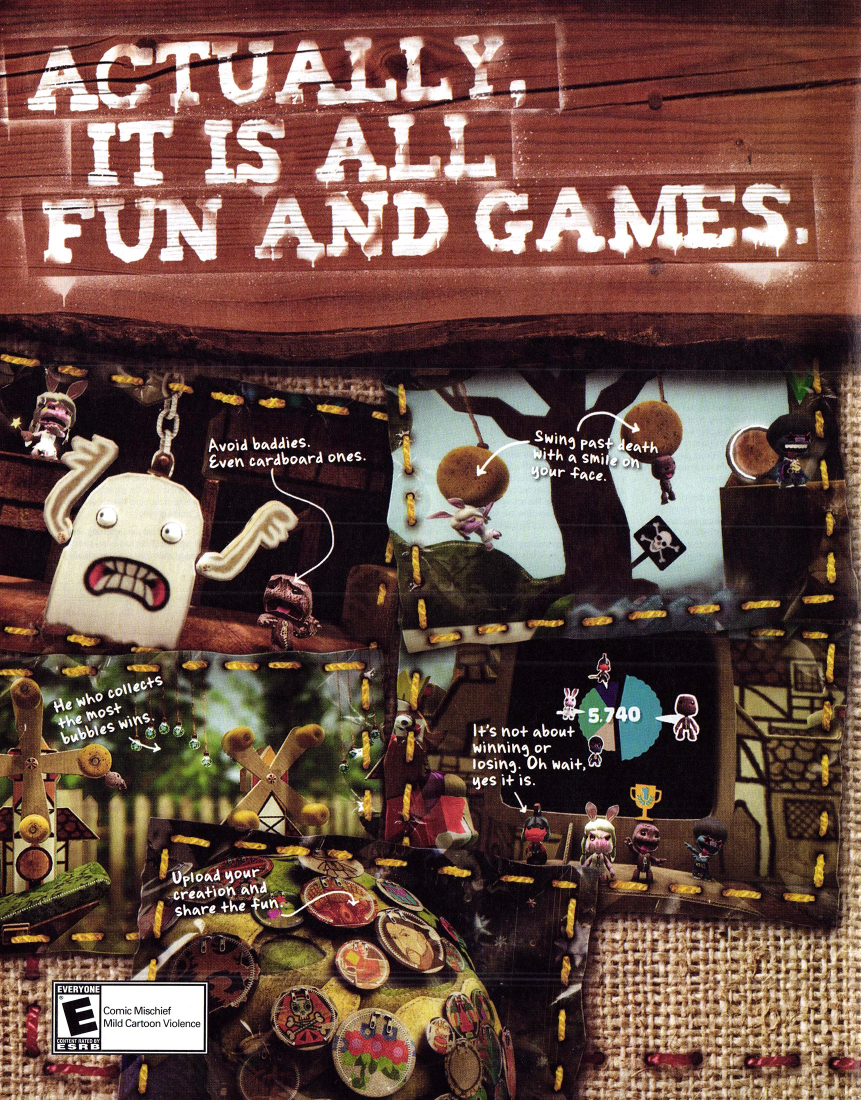
Baby Mama

PRICE: $39.98 **RATED:** PG-13

| MOVIE | Think of *Baby Mama* as the date-friendly version of *Knocked Up.* It's funny and easy to digest, but lacks the balls-out harshness of other edgier comedies. Tina Fey and Amy Poehler have superb comic timing and secondary characters are played to pitch-perfect effect by Sigourney Weaver and Steve Martin. While the script is predictable, this is surprisingly fun… Be warned though: the movie is about having babies, so if only one of your biological clocks is ticking, be afraid.

| EXTRAS | Picture-in-picture support, selecting favorite clips, and amusing cast and crew commentary should give your date and you plenty to check out after watching it.

MOVIE	★★★½
EXTRAS	★★★


ACTUALLY, IT IS ALL FUN AND GAMES.
Avoid baddies. Even cardboard ones.
Swing past death with a smile on your face.
He who collects the most bubbles wins.
5,740
It's not about winning or losing. Oh wait, yes it is.
Upload your creation and share the fun.
EVERYONE
E
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Comic Mischief
Mild Cartoon Violence

LittleBIGPlanet™
Fun shall overcome.
ONLY ON
PLAYSTATION 3
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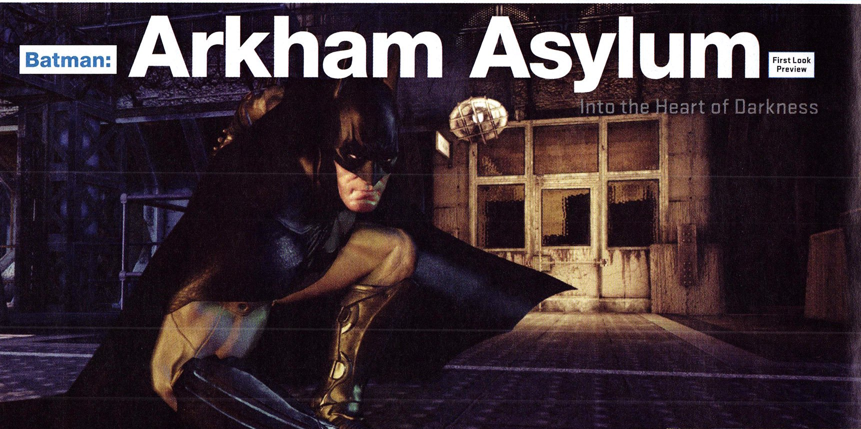
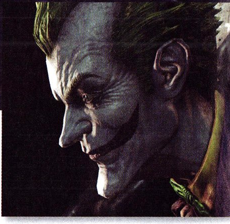
Batman: Arkham Asylum

First Look Preview

Into the Heart of Darkness





You'll constantly feel the Joker's presence in Arkham, which should add a dark psychological edge to the game.

PS3 GENRE: Action AVAILABLE: Q2 2009 PUBLISHER: Eidos Interactive DEVELOPER: Rocksteady Studios

Bruce Wayne is a busy man. Beating up LEGO-ized bad guys, facing off against the *Mortal Kombat* roster, joining forces with the rest of the DC Comics team to take the universe online. The guy's virtually everywhere in videogames these days, but for the hardcore Bat-fans out there, his most exciting interactive adventure is still yet to come. Why? Because *Batman: Arkham Asylum* looks to be the game that finally captures the true essence of the Caped Crusader and puts all of his power directly into your hands.

"We didn't start with a genre, we started with a character," explains Jamie Walker, Director at developer Rocksteady Studios, "we then integrated all the elements of Batman's skills and persona into one game, and *Batman: Arkham Asylum* is the result. Our approach is to make a game that delivers on the promise of being Batman—not just part of his character, but every facet."

And to that end, Rocksteady—previously known for developing *Urban Chaos* for Eidos in 2006—is pursuing an ambitious amalgamation of gameplay elements, including hand-to-hand combat, action-oriented stealth, criminal investigation, and open-world exploration, all set within an elaborate and authentic recreation of one of the most storied institutions in comic book history.

It was a dark and stormy night…

Our demo began, appropriately enough, with the game's opening sequence, in which the Batmobile careens down some midnight-soaked back road with an incapacitated Joker resting comfortably in the passenger's seat. This could get interesting. But before we can even say "terrifically atmospheric," we reach our destination. Where else but Arkham Asylum?

The level of detail is truly impressive. From the intimidating iron gate and weathered stonewalls out front to the exposed pipes and gothic detailing inside, the building not only looks gorgeous but exudes a dark, gritty ambiance (made all the more thrilling by the effective use of Danny Elfman's classic film score).

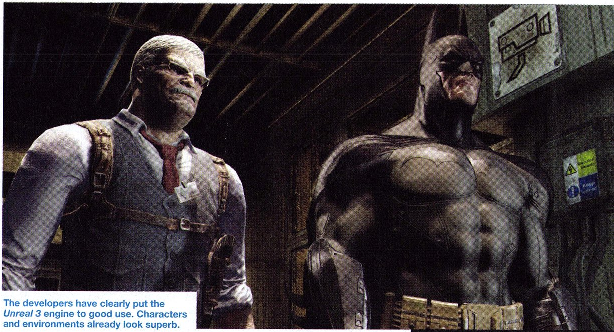
With the camera now positioned in the traditional third-person over-the-shoulder view, we begin to escort the now conscious and handcuffed Joker through Arkham's damp, gloomy corridors as he spouts some truly amusing comments and mocks his captors. We briefly cross paths with the enormous Killer Croc—who, shockingly, vows to kill Batman—before meeting up with Commissioner Gordon.

Naturally, these are just two of the many classic characters that will appear in this game. For now, we know that Mr. Zsasz, Harley Quinn, and Oracle (who serves as Batman's eyes and ears outside of Arkham) are definitely present. However, we also saw some Poison Ivy concept art and a few unmistakable Riddler question marks that the developers refused to acknowledge. No sign of Robin, though.

After briefly conversing with Gordon, Batman is relieved of his escort duties. Of course, it doesn't take long for the Joker to capitalize on this opportunity. In a few quick moves, he manages to break free and escape into the depths of Arkham, only to appear on the large screen in front of us just moments later to inform us that this has been his plan all along and that the asylum is now under his control. And while the developers tell us that the game includes several storylines, the overarching goal is clear: uncover the Joker's motives and reclaim Arkham Asylum.

Arkham Unleashed

After our lengthy introduction to the world of *Batman: Arkham Asylum,* we finally got a taste of its gameplay in the form of a goon beat-down. Although combat seems to be a work-in-progress at this point, the action does look cinematic and solid. "Our Free Flow Combat system is specially designed to make combat feel fast and furious. It is not just the moves themselves but the unique way the player can choose to chain these moves together that gives the combat such a natural flowing feel, as well as so many different combinations of attacks," Walker tells us.



The developers have clearly put the *Unreal 3* engine to good use. Characters and environments already look superb.

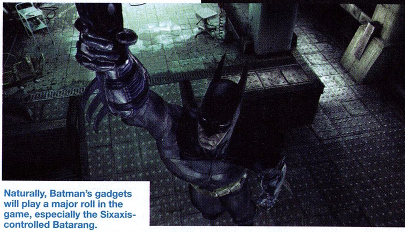
Combat also features a persistent experience meter—which eventually unlocks a few signature Batman moves that should come in handy during boss battles—and a set of "invisible predator" moves that allow Batman to utilize darkness and stealth to stalk his enemies like prey. We watched Batman use his grappling hook to perch atop a gargoyle and then hang upside-down, grab a thug, and string him up in order to distract the other guards. Of course, this situation could have been tackled in any number of different ways, each with its own set of consequences and rewards.

After this decidedly sweet demonstration, we were shown the puzzle-solving "detective mode". Essentially, you can enter this mode at anytime, and doing so will cover the screen with a filter that reveals new information about your surroundings. For instance, we used it to follow a pheromone trail that would otherwise have been invisible. Walker promises, "The investigation in the game is designed to be fun and never compromises the design or gets bogged down in mini-games and puzzles. You are Batman: the greatest detective of all time."

The game's final key aspect—which we were unfortunately not able to experience—is exploration. After the first chapter, all of Arkham Island, not just the asylum, will be open to explore, and the developers promise that it's "full of secrets." The open world creates all sorts of nonlinear possibilities, which, coupled with *Batman: Arkham Asylum's* other features, make us more than ready to break out our Bat-capes. Let's just hope the final experience is worth the cosplay. **Scott Butterworth**

Gotham Authenti-City

The developers are taking every possible measure to ensure an authentic experience, including consulting with publisher Wildstorm on the character designs, enlisting the voice talents of Mark Hamill and Kevin Conroy, having DC writer Paul Dini pen the story, and packing the world full of very specific details encompassing all of the facility's deep history.



Naturally, Batman's gadgets will play a major roll in the game, especially the Sixaxis-controlled Batarang.

"As Batman, you get to tear it up! And you'll feel powerful while doing it," says Studio Director Jamie Walker.

HOLLYWOOD
R/T

TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

Mild Suggestive Themes
Mild Violence
Strong Lyrics

PLAYSTATION 3

XBOX 360 LIVE

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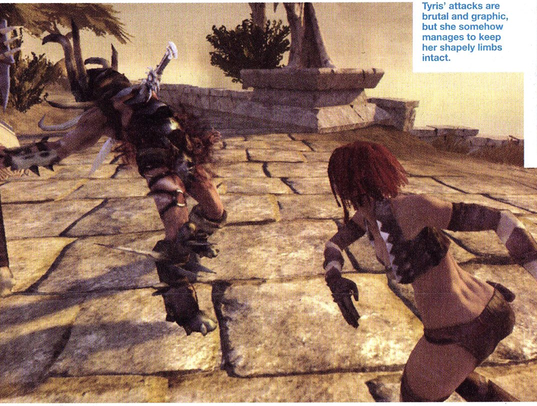
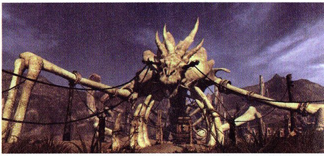
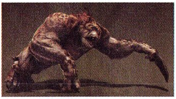


Tyris' attacks are brutal and graphic, but she somehow manages to keep her shapely limbs intact.



The environments have a slightly stylized, almost cel-shaded look that works well with the fantasy setting.



One of Tyris' beasty friends, this creature can hurl small tornadoes.

Enemies tend to be big, powerful, and very ill-tempered.

Golden Axe: Beast Rider

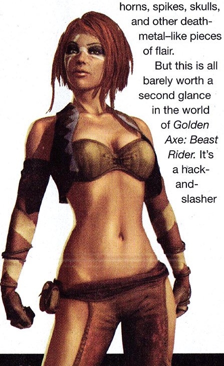
You can't spell "Titan" without "T" and "A"

PS3 AVAILABLE: October GENRE: Action PUBLISHER: Sega DEVELOPER: Secret Level

PS3 | P

Tyris Flare is one bad-ass gal. Clad only in a few scraps of leather and hefting a sword nearly as long as she is tall, she squares off against hordes of hulking brutes decked out in horns, spikes, skulls, and other death-metal–like pieces of flair.

But this is all barely worth a second glance in the world of *Golden Axe: Beast Rider.* It's a hack-and-slasher straight out of a Boris Vallejo print, and perfectly in keeping with the over-the-top fantasy style of the classic *Golden Axe* games. Players guide Tyris through a blasted wasteland crawling with Death Adder's minions using simple attacks and combos, a small assortment of fire magic, and a wide variety of beasts to, er, ride.



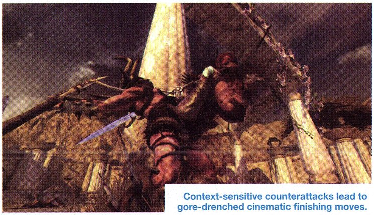
Look, no one's going to mistake *Beast Rider* for high art. In our hands-on time with the game, we plowed through more leathery bad guys than we could count, set a whole bunch of baddies on fire, and rode into the ground a variety of creatures, including a bipedal lizard, a giant ape with spikes on its hands, and a vaguely feline beast reminiscent of the dog-demons in *Ghostbusters.* At no point in this experience were we required to pause and reflect on what it all means, man.

No, we can safely say you can pretty much shut your brain off for this one. The goal is to slaughter enemies in as brutal a fashion as possible, collecting gold and aiming for "Titan bonuses," which increase your gold intake by five percent for every enemy you dispatch without taking a hit. That may sound awfully challenging, but the combat engine includes a simple system to help Tyris dodge, parry, counter, and reflect enemy attacks. With careful timing and a bit of luck, battles can turn into a sort of ballet of eviscerations.

And, oh, there will be eviscerations. The visuals of *Beast Rider* are positively brutal, with decapitations, dismemberments, impalements, and other nasty ends depicted in so much detail that you can catch a glimpse of your enemies' squishy insides as you chop them in half. Environments are also detailed, but we're a little concerned that the look of the game in the first level—colorful, slightly stylized, and actually quite pretty—might be overwhelmed by the bleak, barren, rocky wastes of later levels.

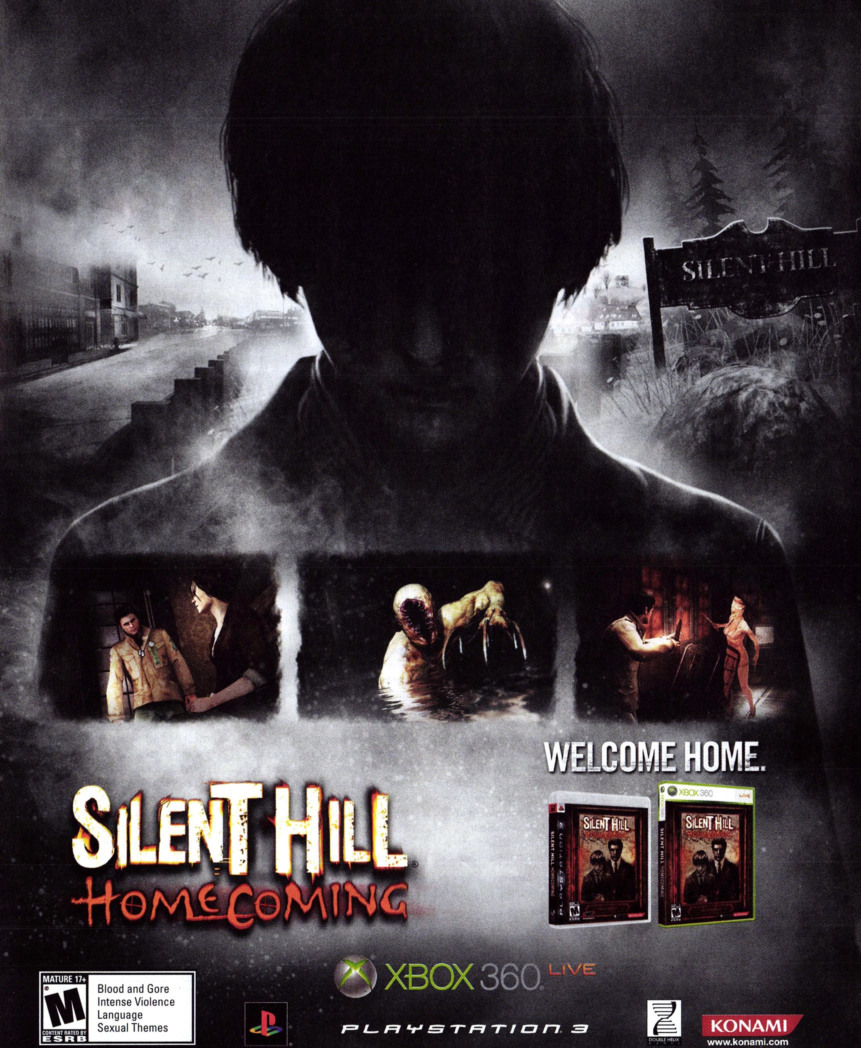
Then again, some players will be too busy ogling Tyris' strategically placed leathers to notice.

Joe Rybicki



Context-sensitive counterattacks lead to gore-drenched cinematic finishing moves.

The Death Adder was the antagonist of the original *Golden Axe*, as well as the arcade-only *Revenge of the Death Adder.*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MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Language
Sexual Themes

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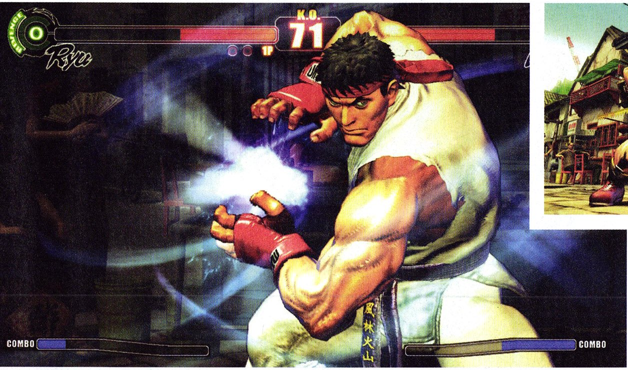
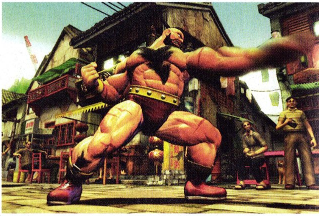


No, Ryu wasn't always this beefy, but you can expect all the characters to sport similar steroid makeovers. *Street Fighter IV* also offers a new array of special moves to complement its updated looks.



Stages offer a truly impressive amount of detail and range from downtown areas to remote jungles.

Street Fighter IV

Hands-On Preview

Far more than nostalgia-induced hype

PS3 AVAILABLE: Winter GENRE: Fighting PUBLISHER: Capcom DEVELOPER: Capcom

After a good chunk of hands-on time with *Street Fighter IV,* I've come to realize one very important truth: the third dimension is overrated. Sure, *SF IV's* visuals look jaw-droppingly slick in 3D, but the gameplay doesn't need a Z-axis to deliver a healthy dose of good old fashion beat-'em-up fun.

Yes, fun. And lots of it. With our hands on the controls, combat felt quick and exciting without being overwhelming, and the silky smooth character animations dripped with more style and flair than a Parisian nightclub. The classic *Street Fighter* control scheme functioned flawlessly, though the simplicity of the button layout belies the hidden sophistication of its combat system: overheads, throws, dashes, canceling moves, all kinds of useful maneuvers beyond the basic punches and kicks just waiting to be (re)discovered and exploited.

And even beyond all these "normal" attacks lies an incredibly deep new system of special moves. First up: the Focus Attack. New to *SF IV,* this character-specific, two-button attack can be executed at anytime. Tap the two buttons for a quick attack or hold them down to charge up for a more powerful, unblockable move. Simple, right? Next come Special, EX Special, and Super moves—each of which is a progressively more complex yet powerful version of the special attacks you know and love (like Guile's Sonic Boom). Naturally, these drain the Special Meter that fills as you deal out damage. Finally, the all-new Ultra Moves pack a mighty punch. Any damage you sustain fills your "Revenge Meter," and once charged, you can cash in with a spectacular combo complete with dramatic camerawork. Yes, this all sounds terribly complex, but rest assured that it feels quite intuitive when you're playing.

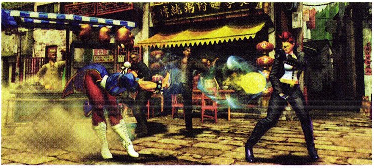
The developers have done an excellent job of balancing hardcore mechanics with accessibility, which should give newcomers a fighting chance while still providing devoted fans of the franchise with the desired depth. Hopefully it will encourage button-mashers to take a few seconds and learn the more advanced techniques rather than simply, well, mashing buttons (which never won me a single fight, by the way). And don't worry, hardcore fans; just because these special moves are easy to execute doesn't mean they're easy to land. Effectively employing special attacks definitely still requires a good deal of timing and technique.

Though my preview time was actually spent on an arcade cabinet, we're expecting a pixel-perfect recreation on PS3, and we'll be getting into character for new office showdowns just as soon as Capcom deems to get the final version in our eager, sweaty hands. Scott Butterworth

PS3 | P

Meet the Team

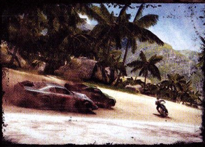
Four new fighters—Abel, Crimson Viper, El Fuerte, and Rufus—will be joining *Street Fighter II's* roster of celebrated characters, bringing the total number of playable characters in *SF IV* to 16 (though rumor has it that the console version will include at least a few more, such as Akuma and Cammy). The developers promise the game will provide back-story and a unique ending for each character.



Characters' faces will contort if they sustain a particularly harmful blow.

While testing the game at Capcom, community manager Seth Killian managed to kick our butt using just one hand. Check out our Facebook page for photographic evidence!

MOTORSTORM™ PACIFIC RIFT



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My SingStar online
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Browse and Buy songs
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Cool!
PLAYSTATION 3
02164
Cool!
Don't stand so close to me
Don't stand

Some of the battles got more heated than others.

This girl scored so high, confetti shot out of the ceiling. True story. Check out the video on My SingStar online.

She couldn't remember my name but knew every word of "Back to Black" by Amy Winehouse.

When everyone lost their voices, we let the real videos play on a loop.

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Lyrics
Sexual Themes
Use of Alcohol
Use of Tobacco

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No girl can resist singing "Girls Just Want to Have Fun." We downloaded the song off the PlayStation Network to prove it.

This guy was unstoppable! A legend! He scored over 8,000 points on all 30 songs!

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STRATEGY GAME OF THE YEAR

TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

- Alcohol and Tobacco Reference
- Blood
- Drug Reference
- Language
- Suggestive Themes
- Violence

GAME CRITICS AWARD 08 WINNER

UGO BEST STRATEGY GAME E3 2008

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NOVEMBER 2008

PLAYSTATION 3

PSP
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NINTENDO DS

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"A SURE CONTENDER FOR GAME OF THE YEAR"
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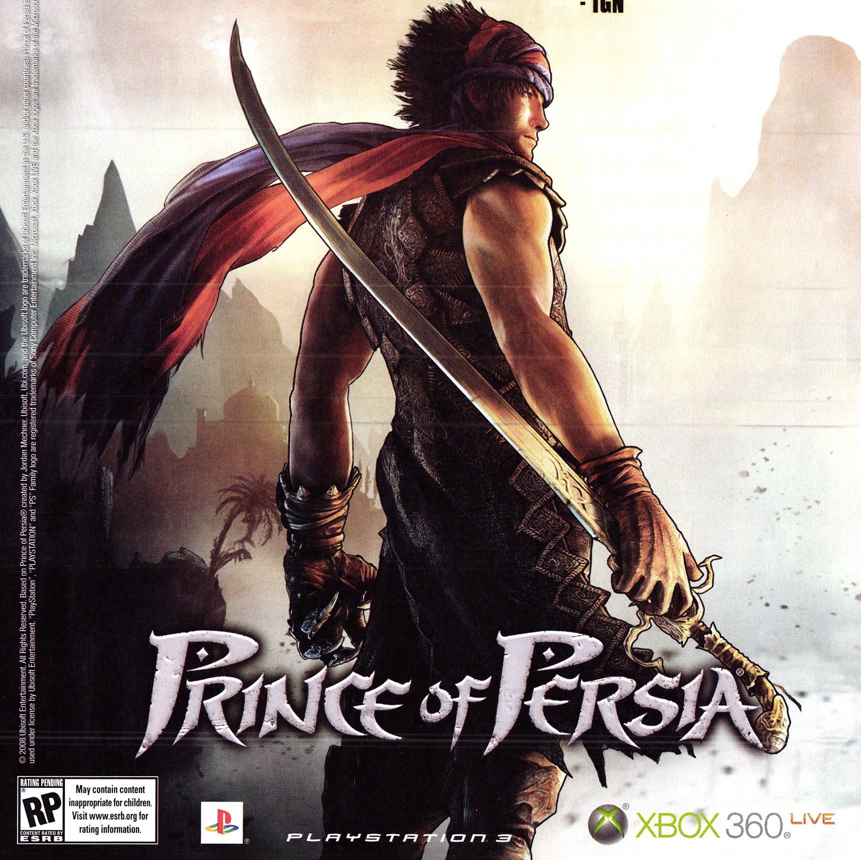

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PLAYSTATION 3

XBOX 360® LIVE

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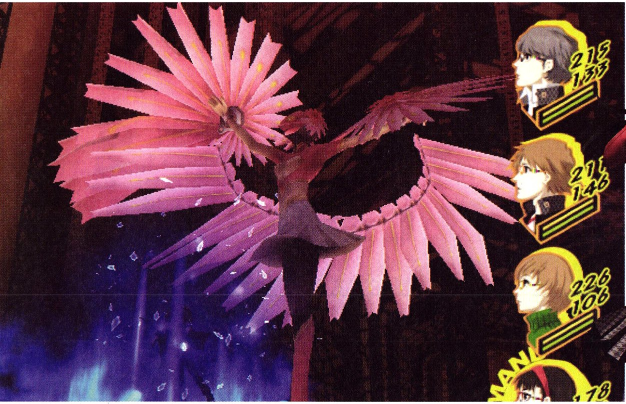
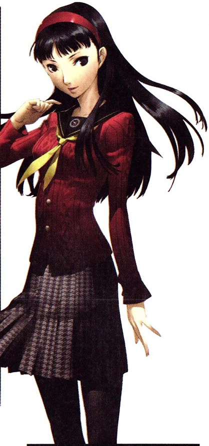




Yukiko Amagi's Persona, Konohana Sakuya, is the goddess of the earth and Japan's famous cherry blossoms.

Fans of the popular *Death Note* anime series should watch for some in-references in *Persona 4*–the actor who played L voices a key role in the game.

Persona 4

Hands-On Preview

How to kill monsters and influence people

PS2 AVAILABLE: December GENRE: RPG PUBLISHER: Atlus USA DEVELOPER: Atlus

Like *Persona 3,* this is a game about a double life. During the day, you're a mild-mannered high-school student—study for tests, hang out with the guys, put the moves on the girls, and otherwise lead a laid-back, average life. At night? Well, the hours of darkness are significantly more complicated.

The *Persona* series has always revolved around a kind of duality. Like most of the Shin Megami Tensei games, it's built on the idea of oddities lurking beneath the skin of the ordinary world. *Persona 3's* big innovation was finding a way to express that theme through its actual gameplay: a quirky social-life simulation by day, a dungeon-crawling RPG by night. What made it interesting, of course, was the way those two game systems fed back into each other. Going out and making the most of the mundane had tangible benefits when it came time to duke it out with the fantastic. *Persona 4* takes that connection to another level.

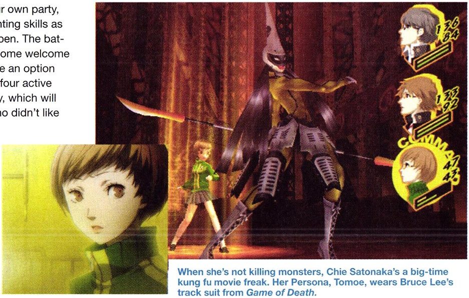
Just like in *Persona 3,* building "Social Links"—connections with people around town—increases the power of the Personas you can create and use in combat. Now, you can also develop Social Links with members of your own party, who pick up new fighting skills as your friendships deepen. The battle system includes some welcome new features, too, like an option to directly control all four active members of the party, which will please *P3* players who didn't like leaving so many decisions up to the computer AI.

But even if you didn't mind letting the party run automatically in *Persona 3,* you'll want to consider taking advantage of the extra control *Persona 4* offers because the game is distinctly tougher. (Unfortunately, it looks like monster types haven't changed much—many familiar enemies are back, with the same strengths and weaknesses as before.) *P4* stops taking it easy after the first few bosses and 15 or 20 levels down the dungeons, most encounters are going to keep even veteran players on their toes.

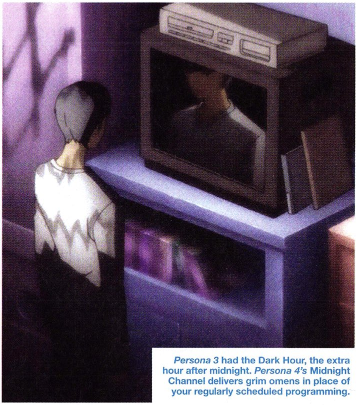
Perhaps as a way of balancing that out, the social-sim gameplay is much more user-friendly. *Per-*

English! Do You Speak It?

Some fans may resent the fact that *Persona 4* can't fit two complete voice tracks on the one DVD, but after a good long chunk of playtime, the English dub is holding up very well. Even hardcore types may be pleasantly surprised—the localized script is exceptionally well-written, and the veteran actors Atlus cast are right at home voicing both games and animation.



When she's not killing monsters, Chie Satonaka's a big-time kung fu movie freak. Her Persona, Tomoe, wears Bruce Lee's track suit from *Game of Death.*



Persona 3 had the Dark Hour, the extra hour after midnight. *Persona 4's* Midnight Channel delivers grim omens in place of your regularly scheduled programming.

sona 3 was solid in that respect, but had its limitations. There were only a few ways to build the main character's social stats, for example, and only a few slots in his virtual daytime schedule for developing Social Links. Daily life could sometimes devolve into a repetitive grind, running the same boring stat-building cycle over several days at a time.

Persona 4 mixes up the schedule with a fuller activities list. Some new pursuits bring in multiple rewards—take a part-time job, for instance, and you might earn money, beef up your statistics, and meet a new Social Link all at once. Even the simpler activities have a little more variety built in. In *Persona 3,* the coffee shop sold exactly one item you could buy to boost your stats. *P4* lets you hit up the local Chinese diner and build your skills by chowing down on all kinds of exotic specials. (Watch out for the dreaded Rainy Day Mega Beef Bowl Challenge!)

Persona 4 isn't just a haphazard collection of RPG nuts and bolts, but we won't be spoiling the details of a story that's so engrossingly weird. From the moment our heroes first fall through their TV screen—and no, that's not a typo—their adventure gets stranger and stranger by the day. Fifteen-plus hours into the game, it's never been so much fun to live a double life.

David Smith

Living In A Television

This series has specialized in serving up the peculiar, the twisted, and the emphatically strange. Nevertheless, *Persona 4's* mascot Teddie might still hold a claim to the heavyweight championship of the weird. A cute cartoon bear with a literally empty head—unzip his body and there's nothing but air inside—he seems like the only inhabitant of the game's foggy otherworld, or at least the only friendly one. He doesn't know quite what he is or where he came from, but who- or whatever created him sure had a sense of humor.

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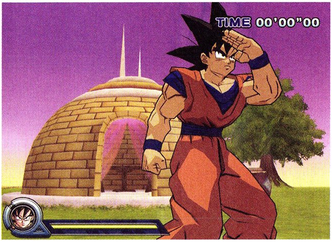
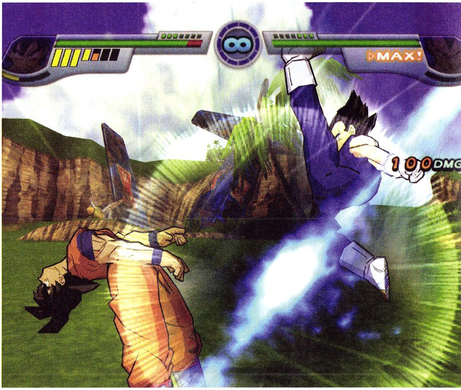




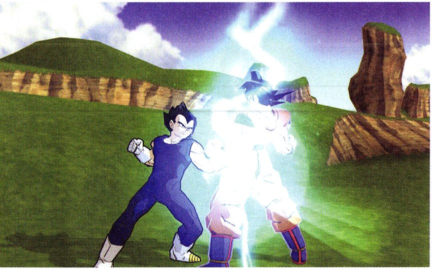
Dragon Ball Z:

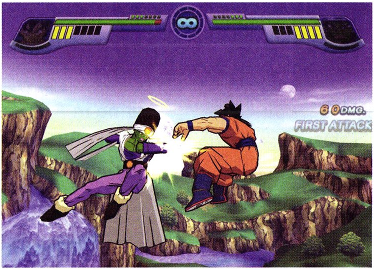
Infinite World

First Look

PS2 AVAILABLE: November GENRE: Fighting
PUBLISHER: Atari DEVELOPER: Namco Bandai

The last *Dragon Ball Z* title for the PS2, *Infinite World* takes the best bits and pieces from the previous *Budokai* games (like Dash and Teleport) and melds them into a new, customizable fighting system. With over 40 unique characters and a slew of mini-games, *DBZ* fans have a lot to look forward to this November. Teresa



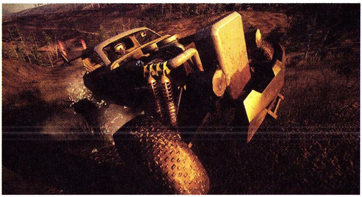


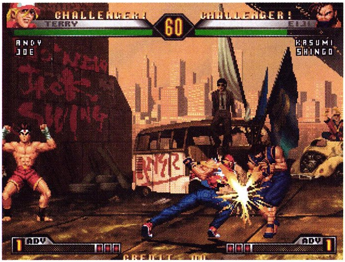
Fuel

Hands-On

PS3 AVAILABLE: 2009 GENRE: Racing PUBLISHER: Codemasters DEVELOPER: Asobo Studios

On the back of genre success with the superb *GRID,* Codemasters has revealed more on its new, stupendously huge racing game. Once known in secret as "Grand Raid Offroad" the new *Fuel* details reveal a game that plans to cover 100,000 miles of tracks and racecourses. The game takes place in an alternate reality where oil is a hot commodity and the fuel shortage has adrenaline junkies thirsting for an opportunity for fast-paced action. Races will be based around famous North American locales such as the Grand Canyon and Mount Rainier. It's promised that despite the size there will be absolutely no loading zones, and you'll be able to see up to 25 miles into the distance! And you'll want to see everything considering you'll not only be battling other racers, but environmental nastiness such as cyclones, blizzards, sandstorms, and more. You'll scream across treacherous terrain in numerous vehicle types including trucks, quads, SUVs, motorbikes, and even rocket cars as you're trying to acquire the last drops of the most precious resource—fuel. Billy

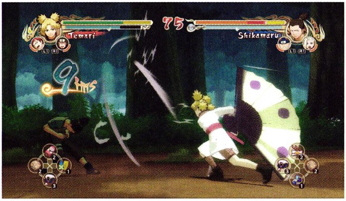




The King of Fighters '98 Ultimate Match First Look

PS2 AVAILABLE: January 2009 GENRE: Fighting
PUBLISHER: Ignition Entertainment DEVELOPER: SNK Playmore

With all the newfangled brawlers hitting the market this holiday season, it's nice to know someone is still looking out for old-skool 2D fighting aficionados. Collecting 64 characters—many from SNK's other famed franchises, including *Fatal Fury* and *Ikari Warriors*—*Ultimate Match* is a three-on-three spritestravaganza that allows you to customize your team to suit your fisticuff style. For fans of classic arcade sock-choppy, *Ultimate Match* might be reason enough to ensure you've got backward-compatibility on that PS3! Gary

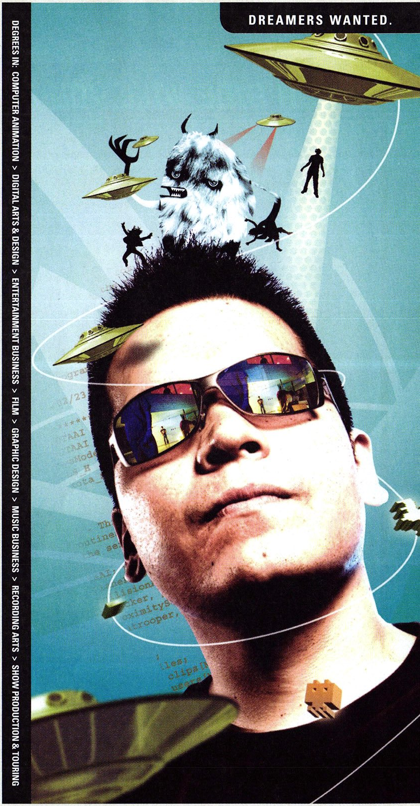


Naruto:

Ultimate Ninja Storm Hands-On

PS3 AVAILABLE: Fall GENRE: Fighting PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai
DEVELOPER: CyberConnect2

I walked into my latest, mostly hands-off demo of *Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Storm* mildly intrigued. I walked out wholly committed. It wasn't the stunning cel-shaded character and object models that floored me the most (though they're the most gorgeous the PS3 has seen so far…even the menus are lush and colorful). Nor was it the sprawling replica of Konaha Village, which Naruto uses as a playground for his leaps, kicks, and Shadow Clone Jutsu. It wasn't even the pick-up-and-play battle controls, the jaw-dropping ultimate moves (like Gaara's Sand Burial), or the new set of skills all characters obtain when they're low on health (often accompanied by a physical transition that changes the character's looks). No, it was the moment I saw Tsunade and Jiraiya whip out their mammoth toad and gargantuan slug to engage Orochimaru and his giant snake in an epic, multi-part battle so reminiscent of the anime that it literally felt like I was playing through an episode. That's when I knew that *Naruto* fans are in for a treat when this PS3 exclusive is released later this year. My only regret? This fast-paced fighter will feature zero online compatibility, supporting two players battling on the same console as its only multiplayer. Teresa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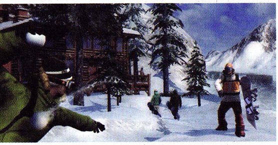
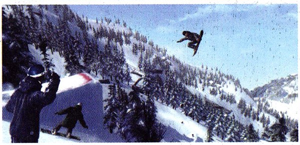
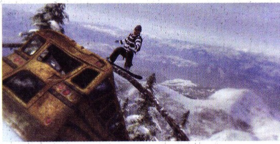


Have fun on and off the board.



Ride mountains populated by real gamers.



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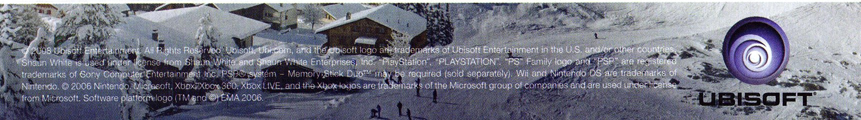

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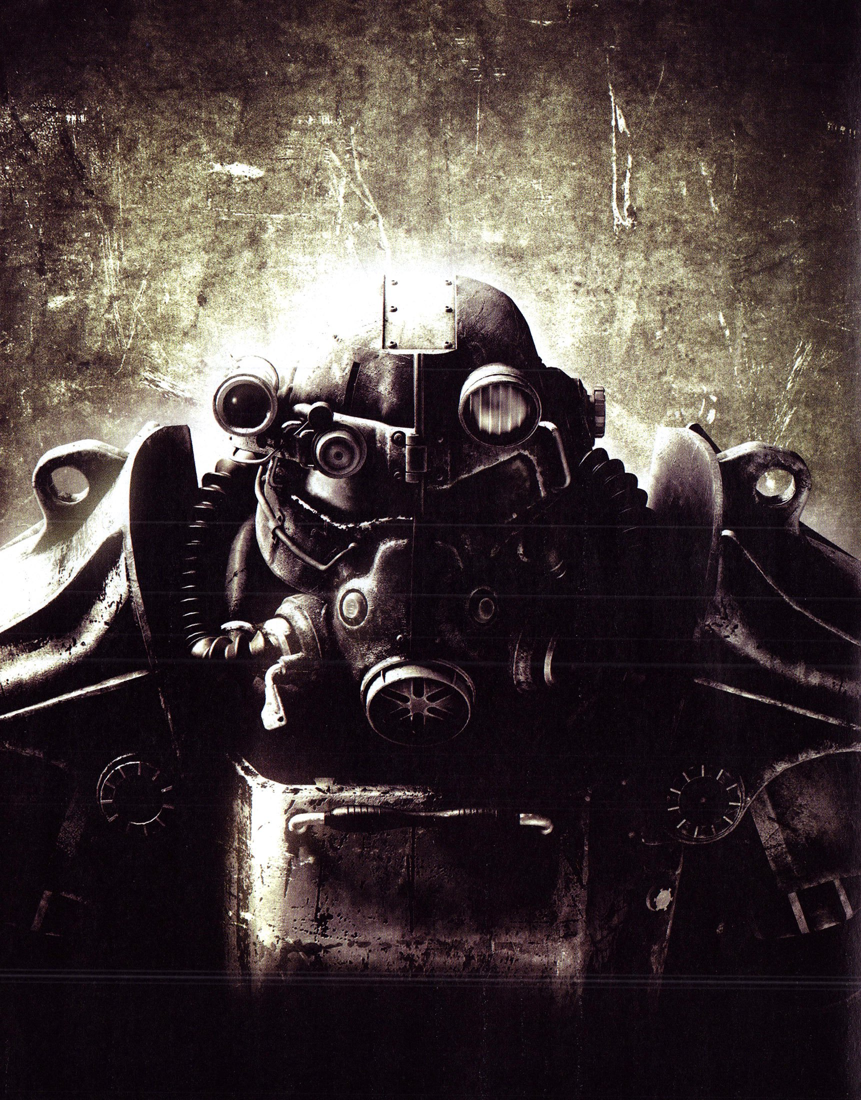

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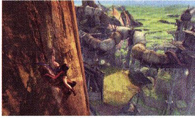

Cover Story

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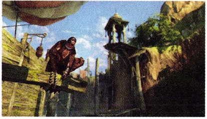
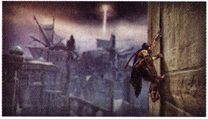
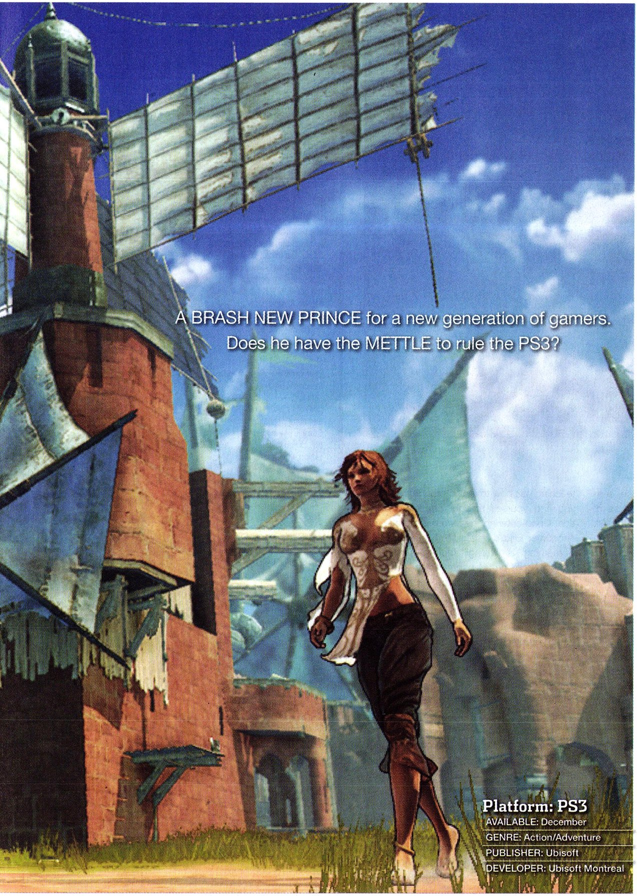






A BRASH NEW PRINCE for a new generation of gamers. Does he have the METTLE to rule the PS3?

Platform: PS3

AVAILABLE: December

GENRE: Action/Adventure

PUBLISHER: Ubisoft

DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Montreal

By Gary Steinman

The world is about to change.

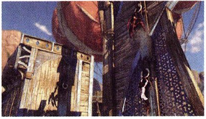
As you read these words, our fair nation will be embroiled in what might be the most important election of the new millennium. Whoever takes the reins of our republic will steer the direction of the country for decades to come. Indeed, no matter who wins, everything will be different.

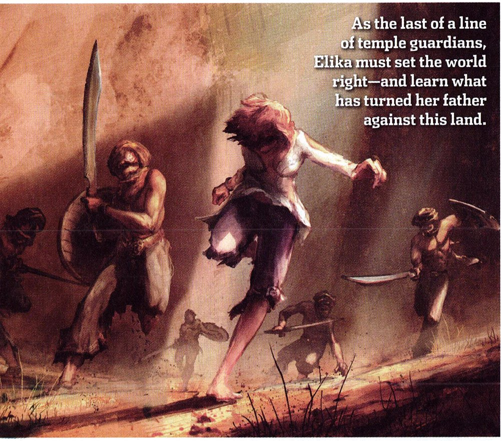
But for gamers, something even more monumental is afoot: We're about to coronate a new prince.

Not that there was anything wrong with the previous prince—a royal adventurer who, in a trilogy of well-received games, sold 11 million copies worldwide. But with the next generation of the PlayStation comes a need for a new monarch to rule our gaming days and nights. We hunger for a fearless adventurer with the courage to tackle corruption wherever it lies, with the skills to survive in an increasingly hostile world, and with the charisma to charm a finicky populace. We need a leader with the conviction to save the world.

In an exclusive visit to Ubisoft's Montreal studio, we spent several hours with this new hero, exploring areas of *Prince of Persia* that no other magazine or website has ever visited before. We battled two fierce foes—the Hunter and the Warrior—along with a host of lesser antagonists. We shared our journey with our new partner, the lovely Elika, and we learned how this dynamic duo will manage the tough task of cleansing this once-beautiful land of the dark, pulsating ichor that has spread its filthy tentacles across a perilous domain of towering spires and hanging balustrades. We ran across walls, leapt from posts, dashed across cliffs, climbed, clung, and clambered. We fought fierce battles and solved brain-busting puzzles. And we didn't just survive—we thrived.

An exhilarating experience, to be sure—but is this nameless fortune-hunter really the heir apparent? Find out more in the following pages, as we unveil the secrets of this new crown prince…





As the last of a line of temple guardians, Elika must set the world right—and learn what has turned her father against this land.

"FARAH! FARAH!"

It's a moment of cognitive dissonance, seeing the Prince wandering through the sand, shouting out that particular name. After all, Farah was your gal-pal in *Sands of Time,* the first in the PS2 trilogy, and anyone with even a shred of interest in the franchise knows the heroine this time around is named Elika.

Turns out that Farah isn't a lady at all. Rather, she's a donkey. And the Prince is chasing her because the stubborn ass had wandered into a tightly guarded temple region with a king's ransom in gold on her back. After a few quick fights with some temple guards, the Prince runs into Elika, who haltingly urges the Prince to turn back. Ever the chivalrous type, our hero doesn't want to abandon Elika to the goon squad, but he soon finds himself overpowered—at which point Elika magically intervenes to save him.

"They're not trying to kill us," Elika explains. "They're trying to kill you!"

"At least tell me how to escape," the Prince protests.

"I can't leave," she says shakily. I've got to get to the temple." Elika collapses.

"OK, I'll get you to the temple. I figure I owe you something for saving my life."

And that's when all hell breaks loose. Literally. After a few additional tutorial bits, teaching you how to move through the world, you find yourself at your chosen destination. Upon entering the massive temple, you encounter Elika's father, the Mourning King. Something is wrong, though—no paternal hug from proud papa. Instead, a battle ensues, after which the King slashes a tree at the center of the temple, unleashing dark Corruption unto the world. After a thousand years of relative peace, the evil Ahriman has finally broken free from the long captivity imposed by his brother, Ormazd, the now-missing god of light. As the last of a line of temple guardians, Elika must set the world right—and learn what has turned her father against this land.

You escape the crumbling temple into the open world, and from this point forward, Elika will be with you. She will always be by your side. She will guide you, and she will fight with you. And together you will find and heal the Fertile Grounds, which feed life energy back into the temple while driving back Ahriman's Corruption. You will choose where to go and how you play in this open-world adventure. You will have every single one of your combat and acrobatic abilities immediately unlocked.

The world is yours. All you have to do is save it from the apocalypse.

Sticks and Bubbles

How do you tell a linear story in an open world? Easy: sticks and bubbles! OK, maybe it's not that simple. According to producer Ben Mattes, the team actually spent countless hours finding the right way to mesh a linear narrative with freedom of choice. In fact, they even flirted with a sandbox style of game early on, but quickly scrapped it when they saw that "no one knew what to do."

"[Gamers] would run and then stop and look around, and then they would jump and fall and die, and they would run and grab something and wouldn't know where to go," Mattes sighs. "It didn't have that flow."

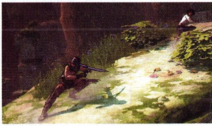
Here's how it works now:

Bubbles

Each bubble region has a guardian posing a specific challenge: combat, puzzle, acrobatic, or some combination of all three. As you heal these bubbles, you'll be treated to non-linear story segments that reveal quite a bit about your particular foe, the backstory of the area, and the world at large, while helping develop the relationship between Elika and the Prince.

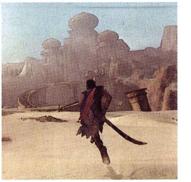
Sticks

Each bubble is connected to several others with "sticks"—multi-layered pathways with acrobatic and combat challenges. Story is limited here, but as you cleanse a region, you might find a lot of Light Seeds along the way.



Temple

Think of the Temple as a hub of sorts. As you collect Light Seeds, which appear after you heal a region, you will eventually accumulate enough to unlock a new magic power. You must return to the Temple to acquire this power. It's there that the linear backbone of the story is revealed, in what we're guessing will be about four to six major sequences. In our playthrough, we returned to the temple at a key point, and along with gaining our new ability, we had yet another confrontation with the Mourning King, an intense boss battle that also revealed more about the motivating central struggle.



Sounds a bit confusing? In practice, it's not. A very clear overmap screen lays out all these sticks and bubbles, and you can set any one of these bubbles as a destination. (Aside from a few final-confrontation bubbles, which are unlocked at various points.) Then, using Elika's compass power, you can summon a beam of light that shows you where to go. Meanwhile, you can easily check how many Light Seeds you need to collect to unlock your next magic power. Finally, you can trigger what Mattes is calling "on-demand dialogue." A quick tap of L2 at almost any time will trigger a conversation that adds even more detail to the world. "We have literally thousands of lines of context-sensitive dialogue between the Prince and Elika that fleshes out the story based on what's going on in the game," Mattes says. "It's not a pool that will play from A to Z; it's a pool that's constantly being refreshed based on what's happening in the game. It's a critical component to our storytelling."

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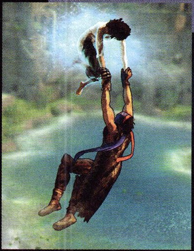
Anatomy of a Prince

With almost as many variations on this storied franchise as there are Arabian nights, you might wonder what exactly defines the titular hero. According to producer Ben Mattes, it's pretty simple: "Young acrobatic warrior who saves the world, with or without the help of a beautiful female character, through his acrobatic and combat prowess, with a healthy mix of platforming, combat, and puzzle gameplay."

As for this specific Prince? "Our goal was to create an accessible action hero. We wanted someone who had layers of complexity in terms of his personality and visual appearance. *God of War's* Kratos is a supercool character, but it's black and white; his personality is pure rage, his dialogue is pure rage, his character design is pure rage—it's kind of easy. With *Prince of Persia* we tried to create more nuanced, layered characters. So our inspiration was anything Harrison Ford has ever done: Indiana Jones, Han Solo. The character Dark Cloud from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*—again, he's kind of rough and tumble, but he's got a soft heart."

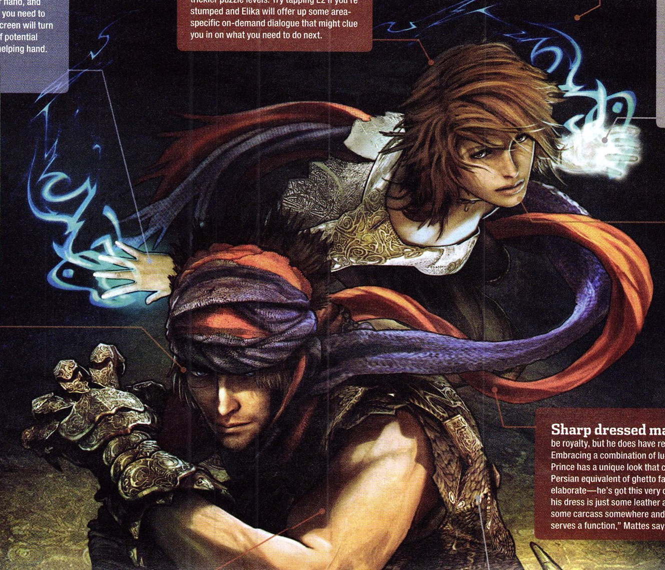
Helping hand What's a platformer without a double-jump? In this case, it's a cooperative jump: Press Triangle in midair and Elika will leap above you, grab your hand, and swing you forward. In areas where you need to co-op jump to clear a chasm, the screen will turn slightly pale (a general harbinger of potential death), indicating that you need a helping hand.



Bright spot No one's accusing the Prince of being the brains behind this operation. Despite his good intentions, he can use some help sometimes, especially with the trickier puzzle levels. Try tapping L2 if you're stumped and Elika will offer up some area-specific on-demand dialogue that might clue you in on what you need to do next.

Closing the gap "As the game progresses, Elika actually starts getting closer and closer to you," Mattes tells us. "She'll start following closer and closer behind you. Her default idle stance will be closer and closer to you. That's just to show the evolution of the bond the two of you are sharing as you go through this challenge together." But is it love? Mutual respect? A Luke/Leia thing? Mattes is mum on that matter…

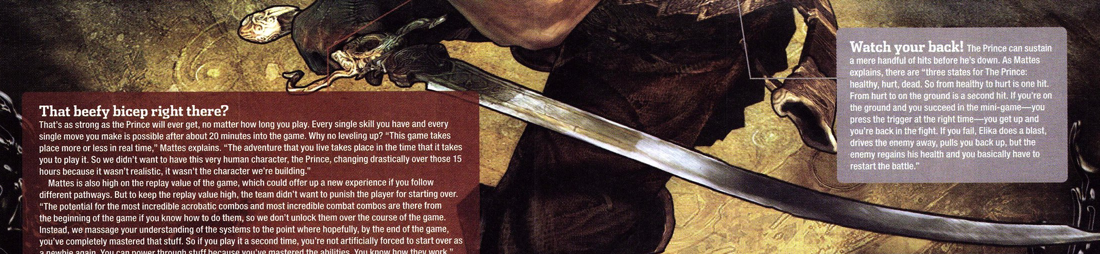
Magic fingers Along with her compass ability, Elika also has the magic necessary to heal the world, as well as handy mid-range magical combat skills. (She's also your respawn mechanism, rescuing you from death but setting you back at specific points on the pathway.) The other magic abilities she gains don't affect the combat or acrobatics; rather, they allow her to trigger carefully placed magic plates that catapult her through a gauntlet of acrobatic challenges into previously unlocked areas. Worth noting: None of this magic is tied to a mana meter; it's all available for unlimited use at any time.



Spellbinding Wondering what language Elika is speaking when she casts her magic? It's Farsi, the official language of modern-day Persia (AKA Iran).

Old blue eyes "There are a couple of things the Prince always has to have," Mattes says. "He can't have a name. He's gotta have blue eyes." As for the scar? "It's not necessarily part of the story. He's gotta look like an adventurer who despite the fact that he's young, has seen a thing or two."

Sharp dressed man He might not actually be royalty, but he does have refined taste—sometimes. Embracing a combination of luxury and functionality, the Prince has a unique look that can perhaps be described as the Persian equivalent of ghetto fab. "Some of his dress is rather elaborate—he's got this very colorful scarf—and some of his dress is just some leather and cloth bits that he pulled off some carcass somewhere and strapped to his legs because it serves a function," Mattes says.



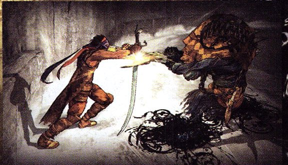
That beefy bicep right there?

That's as strong as the Prince will ever get, no matter how long you play. Every single skill you have and every single move you make is possible after about 20 minutes into the game. Why no leveling up? "This game takes place more or less in real time," Mattes explains. "The adventure that you live takes place in the time that it takes you to play it. So we didn't want to have this very human character, the Prince, changing drastically over those 15 hours because it wasn't realistic, it wasn't the character we're building."

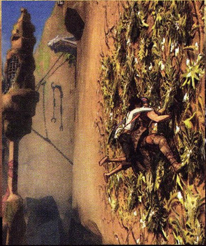
Mattes is also high on the replay value of the game, which could offer up a new experience if you follow different pathways. But to keep the replay value high, the team didn't want to punish the player for starting over. "The potential for the most incredible acrobatic combos and most incredible combat combos are there from the beginning of the game if you know how to do them, so we don't unlock them over the course of the game. Instead, we massage your understanding of the systems to the point where hopefully, by the end of the game, you've completely mastered that stuff. So if you play it a second time, you're not artificially forced to start over as a newbie again. You can power through stuff because you've mastered the abilities. You know how they work."

In other words, the Prince stays the same, but you evolve as a player. Neat, eh?

Watch your back! The Prince can sustain a mere handful of hits before he's down. As Mattes explains, there are "three states for The Prince: healthy, hurt, dead. So from healthy to hurt is one hit. From hurt to on the ground is a second hit. If you're on the ground and you succeed in the mini-game—you press the trigger at the right time—you get up and you're back in the fight. If you fail, Elika does a blast, drives the enemy away, pulls you back up, but the enemy regains his health and you basically have to restart the battle."



Nice legs You'll give those legs quite a workout with the acrobatic challenges in *Prince of Persia*. Everything from wall-running to ledge-leaping to column-climbing, all linked up in thrilling balletic runs. Every area has at least two ways of traversing it, with multiple new paths that open up as you unlock magic powers and then later cleanse the land. Even after you defeat an area boss, you'll have new acrobatic challenges as you seek out all the Light Seeds unleashed into the region, many in areas once closed off by the Corruption.

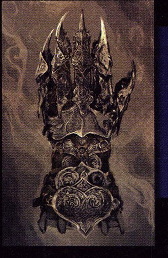


Fight! The goal for combat: No set combos, but the ability to chain together any number of moves in any natural way. The moves? A standard sword slash, an "Elika" attack (longer distance with some magic involved), a power move, and an acrobatic attack. "We didn't want people to have to memorize combos," Mattes says, citing *God of War* as having a combat system he wanted to avoid. "You can win *God of War* with Light, Light, Heavy. You don't need anything else. And yet they probably spent 2.5-million dollars on animation and sound effects and special effects for all of these other things that a lot of players just aren't fully appreciating."

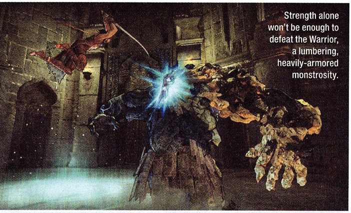
Each enemy is carefully placed within each level, and all battles are one-on-one (well, two-on-one, if you count Elika). Mattes' intention is to infuse every tussle with a dramatic tension not typically present in games where the hero blithely cuts a bloody swathe through hordes of enemies. "An overriding, engrossing philosophy of this game has been: better, not more. So rather than create 10 or 20 low-level generic enemies that have no personality and no background and all look the same, we chose to create fewer enemies but really invest a lot into the story behind them, into their abilities, into the way they look, into the way they fight." Mattes also wanted to avoid the inconsistency he saw in characters like Nathan Drake from *Drake's Fortune*, who shares a similar snarky yet good-natured personality with the Prince, but would then run-and-gun his way through 50 enemies at once. "I really liked *Drake's Fortune*, I thought it was an incredible game, but we felt there was a disconnect there in the personality of the character. It doesn't make him feel human if he can do that kind of stuff."

Black death If you thought the Corruption was just an icky, stationary goo that will immediately kill you with one touch, you'd be wrong—that's merely its lowest level. The second level of Corruption comes in the form of several creatures, each one released into the world by a region's guardian. At specific points, when you square off against an area boss, it'll retreat and unleash a new level of Corruption that will infect all unhealed areas. In our playthrough, we beat back the Hunter until he finally sent forth the Tremor—a shimmering black blob that scurries along walls much like the rotating saw blade traps from earlier *Prince of Persia* games. Each of these creatures will combine and overlap in interesting ways, increasing the acrobatic challenges throughout the world in a dynamic fashion that will be different depending on the order in which you cleanse the world.

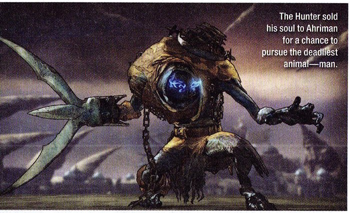
The Corruption also coheres into the "generic" enemies that are placed along various pathways. ("They're sort of a running combat tutorial," Mattes explains. "They're much easier to fight than the boss creatures; they're meant to be fast-paced, intense.") Then there are the bosses, such as the Hunter and the Warrior, and finally Ahriman, whom you'll encounter at the end of the game.



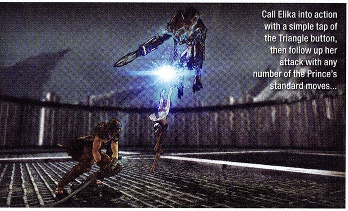
Gauntlet Acquired on a previous adventure, this glove is key to the acrobatic gameplay, allowing the Prince to use his gripfall move. For casual gamers, think of it as a second-chance mechanism, buying you a few precious moments to slide down a wall while you plan your next move. More advanced players will use it to chain together acrobatic sequences that would otherwise be impossible. In our playthrough, we also noticed a few areas where we had to slide down walls while avoiding undulating pools of Corruption. One enticing thought: Mattes would love to explain where the Prince got his gauntlet, but it doesn't fit within the game's storyline. Perhaps we'll get an origin story via future DLC?



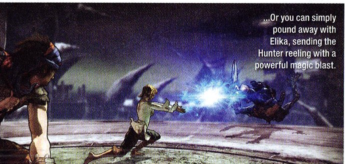
Strength alone won't be enough to defeat the Warrior, a lumbering, heavily-armored monstrosity.



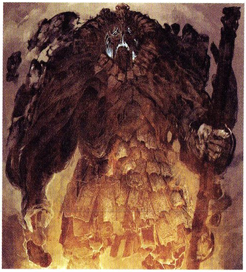
The Hunter sold his soul to Ahriman for a chance to pursue the deadliest animal—man.



Call Elika into action with a simple tap of the Triangle button, then follow up her attack with any number of the Prince's standard moves...



...Or you can simply pound away with Elika, sending the Hunter reeling with a powerful magic blast.



The Warrior

As part of our exclusive hands-on session, we were the first outlet to battle the Warrior, a former king who sold his soul to Ahriman in exchange for the strength to defeat his enemies. Due to his massive size, you can't defeat the Warrior via conventional means. Rather, you need to approach it as a puzzle. The first stage in our battle: an acrobatic attack to weaken our foe. Next: using the environment to finish him off—specifically, driving him off a ledge. For us, it was an epic, exhausting slugfest to get it just right, but with additional combat practice we're hoping we'll dispatch the Warrior with more ease and confidence in our next meeting!

After almost a full day in Persia, whipsawing through acrobatic challenges, squaring off against monstrous foes, and being fully charmed by the thoroughly likable Prince and Elika, we're convinced. Sure, a few issues have yet to be resolved—minor bugs that we have no reason to believe won't be ironed out—but *Prince of Persia* has revealed itself to be a memorable, rousing adventure replete with wondrous feats of derring-do.

Perhaps most remarkable of all, though, is the game's world itself: a multi-layered, interwoven series of pathways and hubs that somehow work together to deliver a cohesive experience. Whether you're slowly inching forward through Corruption-infected territory, rapidly hurtling through cleansed domains in search of Light Seeds, or busting your brain on an environmental puzzle, the game's environment is a beautiful sight to behold, with an enticing variety of natural settings and astounding architecture. But best yet, this world will change depending on how you tackle it. Think of it as a twist on the concept of evolving difficulty: Every time you heal one area, more Corruption is pushed into another, increasing the challenge dynamically. Also, every time you backtrack through a region, you might find a new pathway to follow. "There are tons of acrobatic pathways through our levels that are not the golden path," Mattes promises. "All sorts of shortcuts, different things that you can do, most of which are blocked by Corruption when the world is cursed, are unlocked and available for exploration once that area is cleansed."

But best yet, this world will change depending on how you tackle it. Think of it as a twist on the concept of evolving difficulty.

Combat, however, remains a question. Perhaps due to the time constraints of our playthrough, we never managed to do more than button-mash our way to victory, unable to trigger some of the more strategic combat combos. But we were nonetheless impressed by the cinematic experience that combat offered, and we suspect that with just a bit more practice we'd be able to pull off some spectacular strategic sequences.

"We literally have players now who will immediately go into a defensive stance, let the enemy drive them toward a ledge, block block block block block, counterattack, do a deflect right at the ledge, jump over the enemy's head, so suddenly the enemy's got its back to the ledge, two sword slashes, enemy's on the ledge, win the struggle mini-game, kick the enemy over the ledge, and a boss battle is done in 30 seconds," Mattes smiles. "But it's not easy to do that, of course." Either way, combat seems solid enough, but we'll reserve final judgment on that portion of the game for the review.

Whatever the case, the world is about to change, and we've got a new Prince to guide us through these perilous times. With its innovative world structure, compelling platforming, intriguing combat, engaging story, and stunning art direction, *Prince of Persia* lives up to its royal lineage and might once again rule our console for another generation to come. ■

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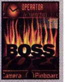

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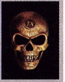
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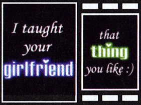
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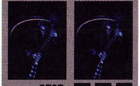
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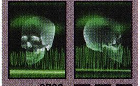
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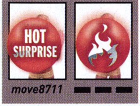
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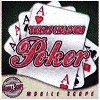
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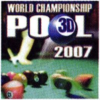
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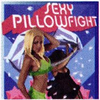
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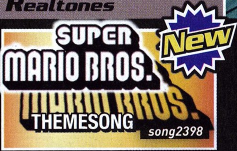
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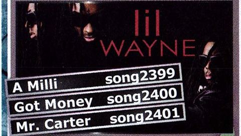

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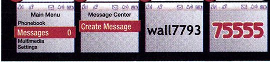
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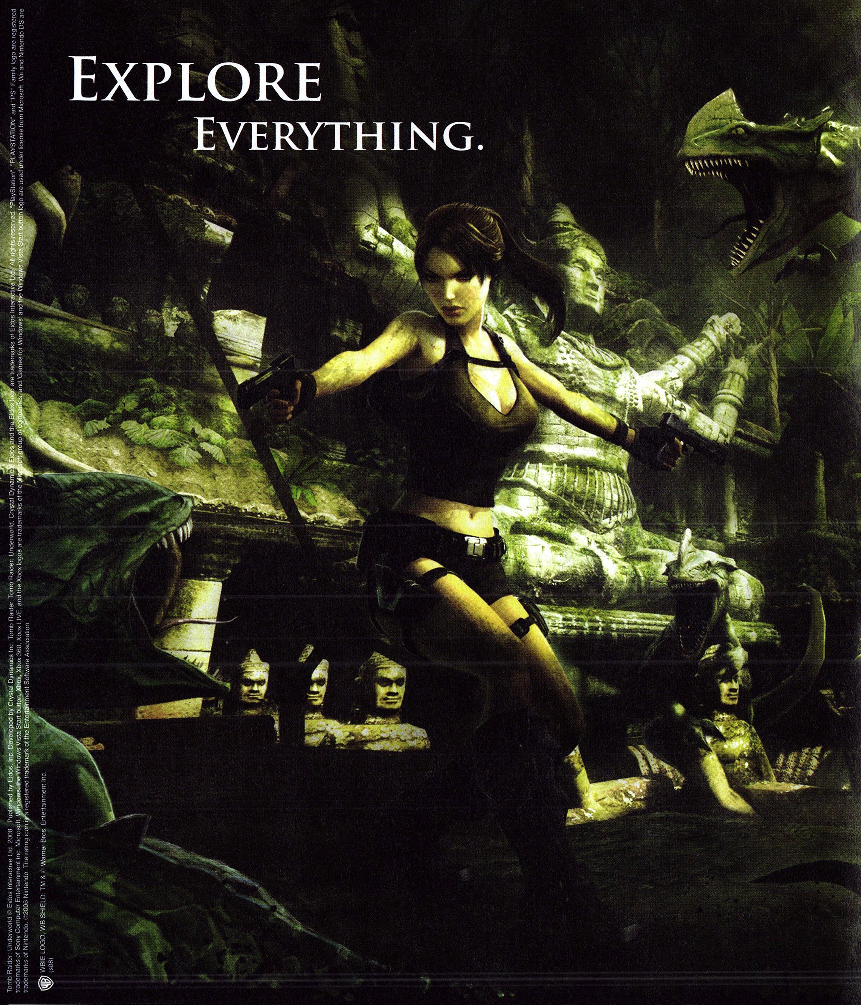

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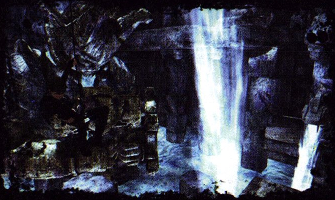

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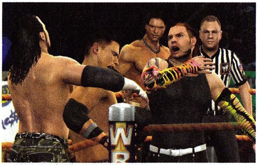

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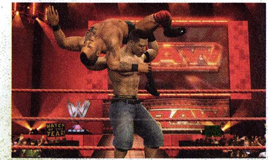

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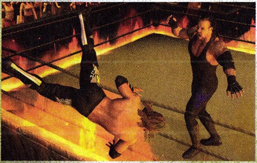

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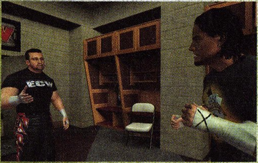

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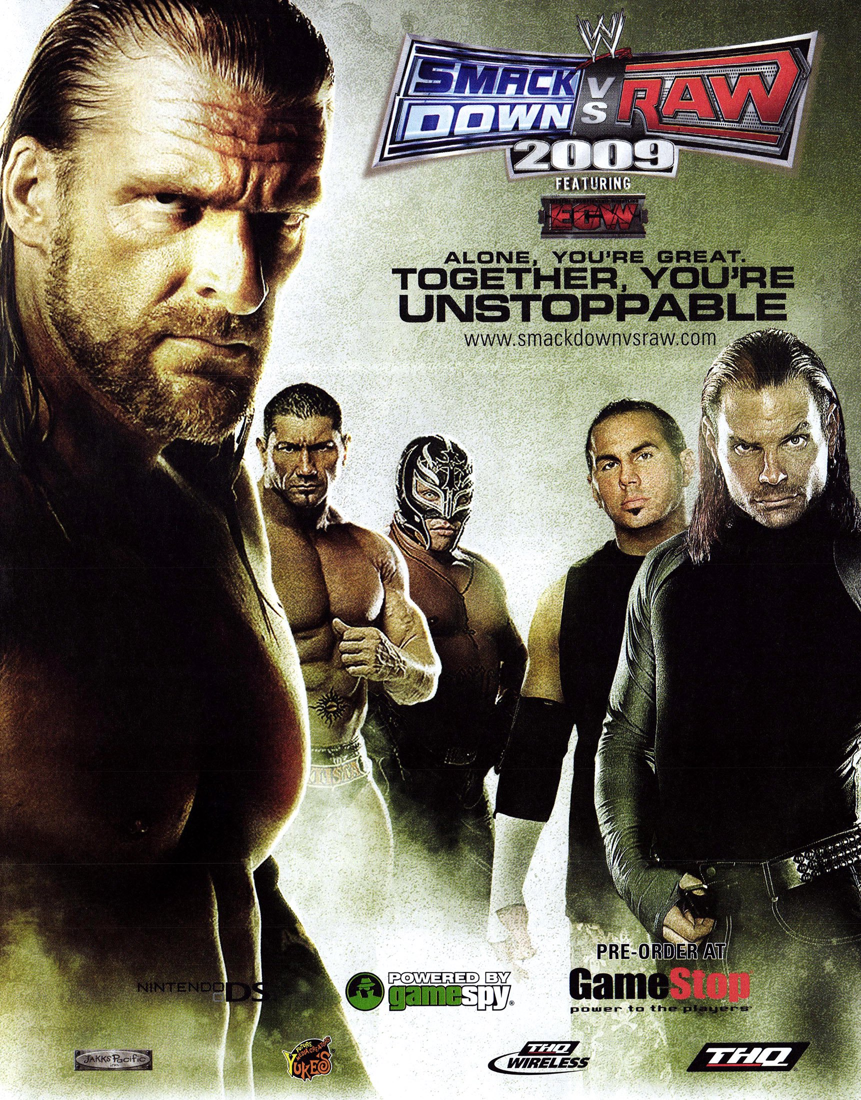
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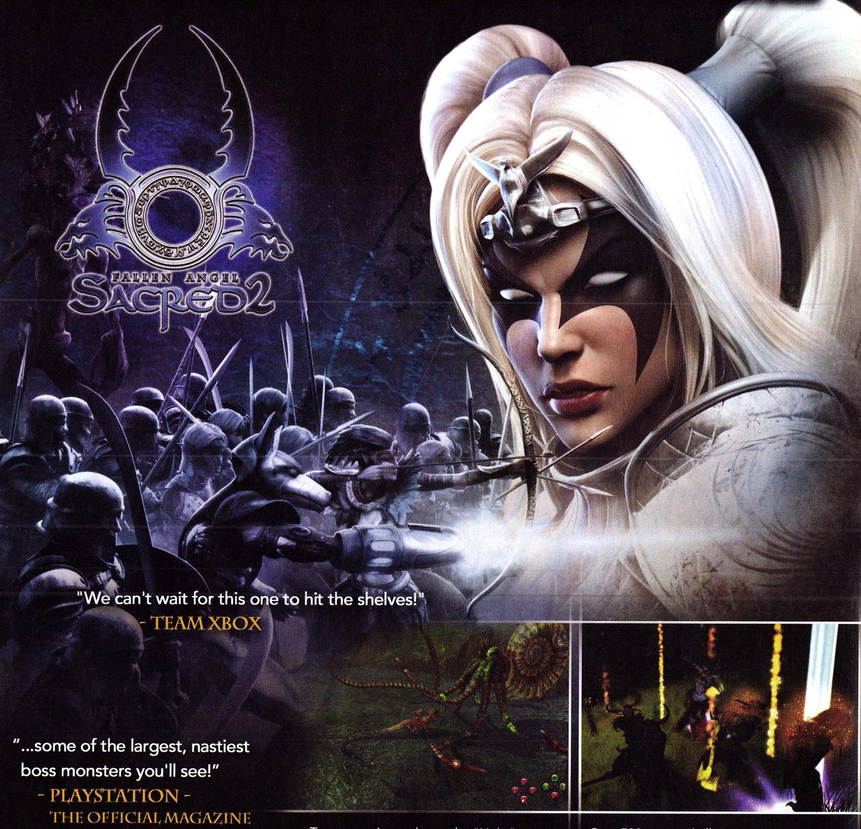

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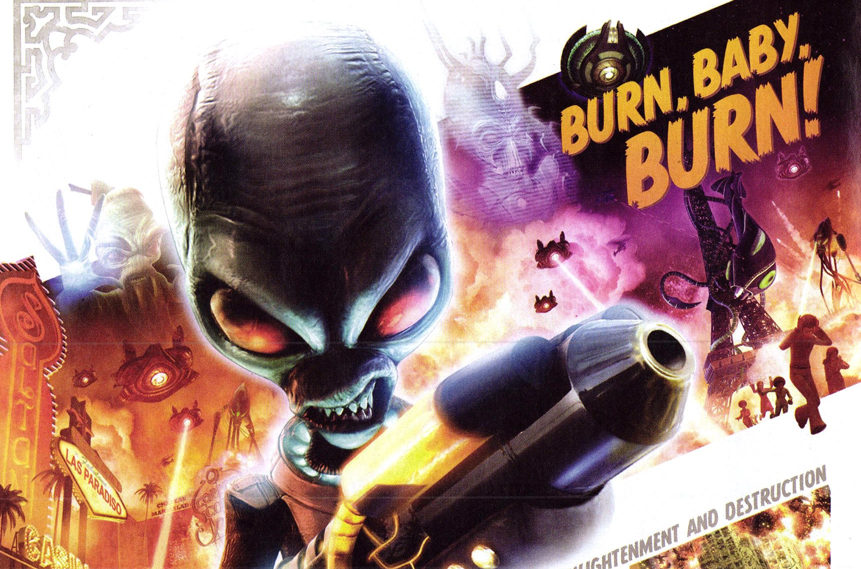

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FRIGHTS ON!

FACT: There is no better way to spend All Hallow's Eve than with the best of the scariest. Pick your pants-spoilin' poison!

Reviewed

Dead Space »
Disarming your enemies has never been so gruesome, but is it all limb-cleaving delight or just a bloody mess?

Silent Hill: Homecoming
This horrifying romp about family, home, and your worst nightmares will crawl into your head, creep under your skin, and *own* you.

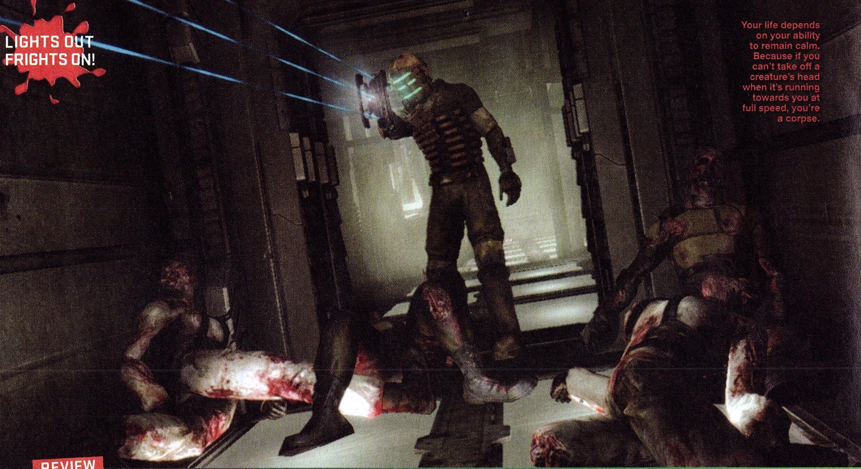
Previewed

Resident Evil 5
Ah, an exotic African locale, plenty of sunshine, a sizzling hot partner, and...an endless parade of bloodthirsty zombies.

F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin
Revisit the Origin Facility on the night of its destruction, but be prepared for an angrier (and needier) Alma.

Alone in the Dark
PS3 owners: Get ready for the definitive, extended version of a gore-filled, survival horror mystery set in New York's Central Park.

And more...
Aliens: Colonial Marines, Ghostbusters: The VideoGame, BioShock 2, SAW, and a cryptic new title.



Your life depends on your ability to remain calm. Because if you can't take off a creature's head when it's running towards you at full speed, you're a corpse.

REVIEW

Dead Space

What are you willing to give up your life for?

| PS3 | $59.99 | ESRB: Mature | PUB: EA | DEV: EA Redwood Shores

Gore in gaming is nothing new. Gamers have been reducing enemies to bloody piles of entrails since *Doom.* But few games have enjoyed the distinctly marketable honor of being banned in three countries for their gruesomeness. Congratulations are in order then for *Dead Space,* where not only can you literally rip enemies apart limb by limb, it's encouraged. But EA's new horror franchise is more than just mindless carnage. Beneath all the blood, guts, and hype beats the heart of a solid, compelling survival horror game.

You strap on the gravity boots of ultra-generic space engineer Isaac Clarke—who, like many on the game's short list of characters, is about as distinctive and exciting as tofu—as he embarks on an ill-fated mission to repair the *USG Ishimura*—a deep-space mining vessel that has fallen mysteriously silent—only to discover that the ship has been overrun by a legion of horrific monsters.

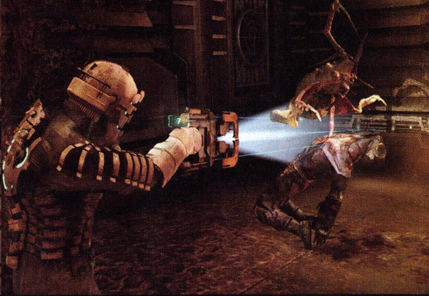
Though the underlying premise may not be the most original (see: *System Shock 2), Dead Space* establishes its own unique creepy-cool sci-fi atmosphere, offering only fragmented glimpses of what really happened on the *Ishimura* through audio memos, video logs, and esoteric graffiti that provide just enough haunting information to be intriguing yet remain vague enough to let you wonder and infer.

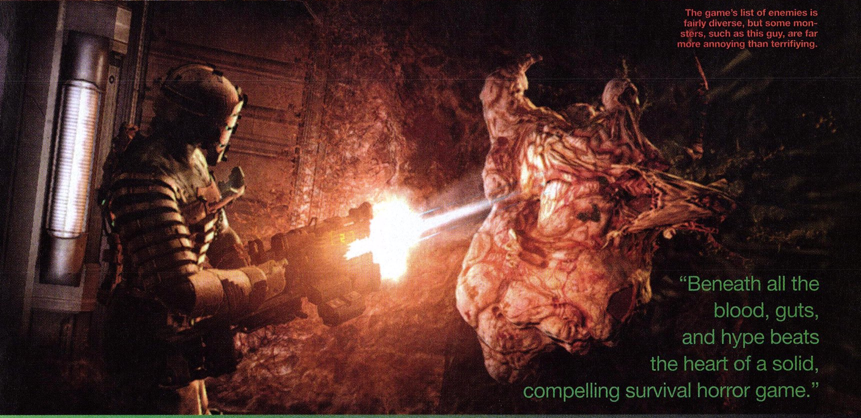
Unfortunately, this elusiveness ends up subverting the revelation of the truth behind the catastrophe because what you're initially led to believe is considerably more interesting than what you eventually uncover. Compared to the elegance of its early storytelling, the big plot twist feels heavy-handed and forced, and worse yet, it just barely makes sense. The result is a story that's interesting but not hugely satisfying.

In contrast to the story's early ambiguity (and eventual haziness), the puzzles and mission structures couldn't possibly hold your hand any tighter. The game features a whopping two puzzle-solving mechanics: a gravity gun and a slow-motion-inducing (stasis) gun, which are actually great fun on their own but reduce every "puzzle" to a simple game of "move that thing there." And just for good measure, your omniscient helper-buddy typically chimes in to tell you exactly what you need to do anyways. Yes, the wildly thrashing field of laser beams is dangerous. I didn't need you to radio in and tell me.

Far more annoying, however, is the fact that nearly every single mission is a glorified fetch-quest through a linear set of similar-looking corridors. "Find the three navigation cards! Fix the six satellite dishes! Fetch the access codes from the morgue!" The entire ordeal becomes so formulaic so quickly that the flimsy excuse you're given for having to walk down the next set of hallways becomes largely irrelevant. Throw in a little tedious backtracking and survival on the ship starts to feel dangerously close to work.

Thankfully, the game never actually stops being fun due in most part to the





The game's list of enemies is fairly diverse, but some monsters, such as this guy, are far more annoying than terrifiying.

> "Beneath all the blood, guts, and hype beats the heart of a solid, compelling survival horror game."

supremely cool combat and the somewhat rare but totally worth-the-wait moments when something truly badass happens. Unlike other shooters, your primary weapons in *Dead Space* are all mining tools—like a laser cutter and an awesome flamethrower—and the object is to "strategically dismember" your foes. And it works beautifully.

Chopping the legs out from under an enemy, causing geysers of blood to gush onto the floor—only to have him continue to claw his way toward you—feels poetically intense and satisfying. I found myself laughing maniacally and yelling obscenities at the monsters in my television, which is always a good sign. Also, the ever-so-controversial (and wonderfully disgusting) gore truly does enhance the impact of each nerve-tingling encounter. As for those badass moments, well, I'd hate to spoil anything. But I can tell you that certain portions of the game take place in zero gravity and that there may or may not be an epic boss battle or two. These unique scenarios and the core combat, which constitutes the majority of the game, help to elevate the overall *Dead Space* experience above its flaws.

And don't be fooled: the shooter-heavy gameplay doesn't mean the game lacks survival horror strategizing. Save points, ammo, and health are all scarce, and the well-executed lighting and sound design help cultivate an inescapable sense of foreboding. Disappointingly, most of the game's big scares are cheap thrills based on monsters jumping out at you—akin to your roommate sneaking up on you while you're wearing headphones—or ridiculously over-the-top set pieces that are more likely to elicit an "Um, okay" reaction than actual fear. Still, with the lights off and the phone disconnected, the sound of your own footsteps might be enough to cause hairs to prickle.

Despite my complaints, I enjoyed *Dead Space*. Quite a bit, actually. Excellent carnage, smartly implemented controls, and solid technical work all come together to create an experience that's fun and frightening. And though its premise may be slightly unoriginal, it's refreshing to play a horror game that doesn't have a sequel number in the title.

Scott Butterworth

★★★★

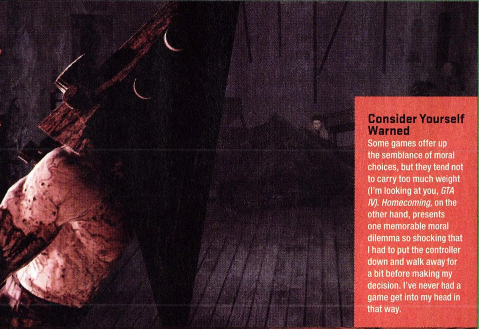
Rise of the Necromorphs

If you're at all intrigued by *Dead Space's* ominous premise, check out the online prequel comic at DeadSpace.ea.com. Not only will it provide you with some tantalizing details about the events that occurred immediately prior to Isaac's arrival, its characters and dialogue are in many ways stronger than those in the game.

Silent Hill: HOMECOMING

Home is where the heart explodes from terror

| PS3 | $59.99 | ESRB: Mature | PUB: Konami | DEV: Double Helix



The famous Pyramid Head makes a significant appearance in *Homecoming*, but his role is limited to non-interactive scenes. That doesn't change the fact that he's creepy as hell.

Consider Yourself Warned

Some games offer up the semblance of moral choices, but they tend not to carry too much weight (I'm looking at you, *GTA IV*). *Homecoming*, on the other hand, presents one memorable moral dilemma so shocking that I had to put the controller down and walk away for a bit before making my decision. I've never had a game get into my head in that way.

Tense. I'm feeling very tense right now. Having subjected myself to the roughly 15 hours of psychological and emotional trauma that permeates *Silent Hill: Homecoming*, I'm ready for something lighter and more upbeat, like perhaps a visit to a slaughterhouse, or a root canal.

I'm exaggerating, of course, but only a bit. Make no mistake: *Homecoming* is a very trying experience. This is, however, the highest praise for a *Silent Hill* game; you know going in what you're signing on for, and the more horrifying the experience, the better.

TWISTS AND TURNS

In that regard, *Homecoming* is easily one of the best in the series. It takes the disturbing, occult-themed horror that characterizes the franchise and ratchets it up to a personal level. The game deals with some seriously heavy themes of family, trust, and community—but it does so in an adult way, leaving you and your own head to interpret them how you so choose.

But the plot isn't without flaws. The complex interrelationship between the "real" world and the "Otherworld" that's a trademark of the series sets up some hard-to-follow moments, especially at the beginning of the game. As I was trying to get my bearings, the game kept tossing out apparent non sequiturs: I'm in a hospital! I'm in a house! I'm in a cemetery! The connections between the plot points are certainly there, but in the first third or so of the game they're confusingly subtle.

Anyone who's enjoyed previous games in the series, though, will be happy to go along for the ride, and soon enough a picture begins to emerge—a very twisted, ugly picture. I don't want to spoil any details, since some of the finest moments in any *Silent Hill* game are those flashes of realization where you finally start putting together a theory of what's actually going on. But I will say this: *Homecoming's* story is challenging, but it's consistent. When you start to see the big picture, the events you've been through definitely

make sense. That's something you can't say about every *Silent Hill* game.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

All this fine and frightening storytelling wouldn't mean jack, though, if the gameplay didn't hold up its end of the bargain, and with few exceptions *Homecoming's* absolutely does. The new combat system is fast and sensible, making encounters with the creepy-crawlies less of a chore than in some of the previous games. The timing-based evade-and-counter mechanics pushed me to approach encounters with greater care than in previous games, and a single round of thoughtfully placed weapon upgrades created a natural balance as enemies got tougher.

Combat's not perfect, alas: Both movement and camera control can prove challenging in particularly close quarters, and I ran into a few instances where I found myself unable to activate a necessary health item because my character was in the middle of an animation. I'm also a smidge disappointed in what felt like a limited number of enemy types compared to previous games—but given that each enemy is so different, that's forgivable.

Also forgivable are the lengthy loading screens between areas. They interrupt the pacing and tension, which is a shame, but given the extreme level of visual detail I'll take the delay if it pays off with this quality. Protagonist Alex Shepherd's home has a realistic, lived-in feel, for example, and the gruesomely detailed Otherworld areas are full of cringe-worthy moistness and bleak decay. Also noteworthy are the characters, which are gorgeously lifelike and exceptionally well animated (though lip synch still has a ways to go). And the real-time transitions between the real world and the Otherworld are technologically impressive and suitably creepy. The game does stumble with a few visual glitches and a couple of surprisingly bland areas, but overall the look is quite striking.

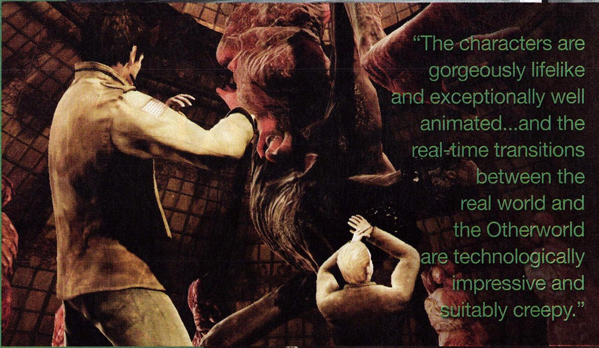
In fact, the whole game is quite striking. Complaints aside, *Homecoming* manages to be consistently excellent, serving up one memorable scene after another and almost never stooping to predictability. I can't imagine *Silent Hill* fans not loving this entirely worthy successor, and anyone with a jones for a true horror fix should also walk away satisfied.

A bit of advice, though: Plan frequent breaks. Your emotional well being will thank you for it.

Joe Rybicki

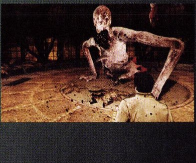
★★★★½

The Home Team
Homecoming is the first *Silent Hill* to be developed by an American studio, but Double Helix has managed to be amazingly faithful to the earlier games. I sincerely hope any sequels will come from the same team.



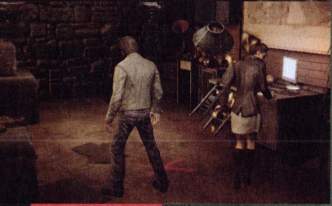
"The characters are gorgeously lifelike and exceptionally well animated...and the real-time transitions between the real world and the Otherworld are technologically impressive and suitably creepy."

Master Class in Pickup Placement
Health and ammo distribution can make or break a horror game. In *Homecoming,* I almost always felt like I had just enough of both to pull them out in dire circumstances, but never enough to get truly comfortable. To me, that's a perfect balance.



LIGHTS OUT FRIGHTS ON!

The improved first-person mode now shakes and jiggles to make it feel like you're actually walking.



PREVIEW

ALONE IN THE DARK

Second time's a charm

| HANDS-ON | PS3 | RELEASE: Fall | GENRE: Action Survival | PUB: Atari | DEV: Eden Games

We like a company that can take criticism—and not just the veiled, sympathetic "well, at least it's got a nice concept" type, but the harsh rants and cold (even cruel) words of finicky gamers. But Eden Games not only willingly scoured the criticism-filled forums after its underwhelming release of *Alone in the Dark* on the Xbox 360 earlier this year, it was determined to fix the game's flaws, even if it meant changing the entire game philosophy.

Initially, the developers wanted in-game actions and behavior to reflect real life. So instead of a traditional inventory, for example, your items were all contained in your jacket. But not all the mechanics were cleverly executed. To access your items, you had to fumble clumsily through your jacket (thanks to the unresponsive control scheme), and since real life has no pause button, enemies would be barreling toward you or even smacking you while you tried to pull out the right combination of objects to fight back.

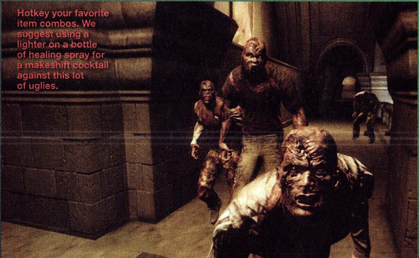
But not anymore. After listening to gamers' feedback, Eden Games has learned to balance realism with fun. Accessing your inventory is now smoother and pauses the action. You no longer need batteries for your flashlight. The camera has been fixed, so it's now further behind you and can be moved to see around, behind, or above you using the right analog stick. Your character, Edward Carnby (who wakes up inexplicably in a modern New York and has to unravel the mystery of why Central Park is being mutilated by monsters), is now a lot more responsive and able to run, turn, and shoot as smoothly as characters from other third-person shooters.

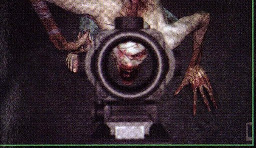
The list goes on—car controls have been simplified, checkpoints added, gameplay elements moved or removed—and from my hands-on experience, the developers at Eden Games have tackled the crux of the game's original technical problems. That fact, plus a new, exclusive underground subway sequence in the sixth chapter of the game, means that PS3 owners will be getting the best, most-polished version of this horror franchise's latest iteration. Teresa Dun

OTHER SHOCKERS

Aliens: Colonial Marines

It's hard to take a misstep when you're creating an action game around fleshy, vulnerable (but well-armed) human marines surviving against the near-perfect Aliens. Put that premise in the hands of Gearbox—one of the most talented studios in videogames today—and we expect greatness. While not too much has been revealed, we understand that you play as a squad of four uniquely defined marines who were out looking for what happened to Ripley in the post-*Aliens* and *Alien 3* timeframe. Aboard the *Sulaco*, and even the *Nostromo* (the ship from the original *Alien* movie) you'll be facing the Alien threat but using tactical maneuvers as well as sheer flame-throwing and bullet-spewing firepower to stay alive. Marines, Aliens, and Gearbox…yeah, we're in!


Hotkey your favorite item combos. We suggest using a lighter on a bottle of healing spray for a makeshift cocktail against this lot of uglies.



You play as Michael Becket, a man who's mysteriously tied to Alma. *Project Origin* begins 30 minutes before the first game's cataclysmic ending.

> "The AI enemies in *F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin* will hunt you down, lure you out, and strategically gang up against you."

PREVIEW

F.E.A.R. 2: PROJECT ORIGIN

| HANDS-ON | PS3 | RELEASE: February 2009 | GENRE: FPS Horror | PUB: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment | DEV: Monolith Productions

A psychotic girl, a corrupt organization, and a point man walk into an ATC facility...

Sandbox worlds have become common. You can run around freely in *Assassin's Creed*, *GTA IV*, and half a dozen games coming out this holiday. But when was the last time you heard of a game that emphasizes sandbox AI? That is, deadly intelligent AI cognizant of your every duck or advance, and able to manipulate the fully destructible environment as if it were their playground? Hardly ever, especially in a horror game—and that just makes Monolith's sequel to the hit 2005 classic even scarier, since the AI enemies in *F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin* will hunt you down, lure you out, and strategically gang up against you.

As I maneuvered through the lush fixings of a posh apartment complex on a mission to retrieve Genevieve Aristide (Armacham soldiers were also after her for an unrevealed reason), I noticed a few superficial changes right away. *Project Origin* features a richer color palette than the first game, exemplified in the displays of flowers and splashy paintings I walked passed. Also, while dark, cramped hallways are a staple, *Project Origin* features many open environments as well, such as charred streets and wide courtyards. The goal, according to Monolith, was to keep players on their toes, never knowing what'll be thrown at them next.

A more significant change is in the controls. The control scheme is laid out similar to other first-person shooters, and is so easy to pick up that I had no trouble making my way through levels that reminded me, surprisingly, of *Call of Duty 4* (okay, I had a little bit of trouble, but not due to controls…those enemies are ferocious). But when I reached my first Remnant (a shell of a human that mindlessly relives whatever they were doing in their last moment of life—the exact moment before the creepy Alma reaped their soul and turned them into a being of psychic power), I admit it: I screamed. I won't reveal why, but know this: Even with the variety of eye-candy environments and the focus on excellent shooter gameplay, *Project Origin* (and Alma) will have you jumping at shadows.

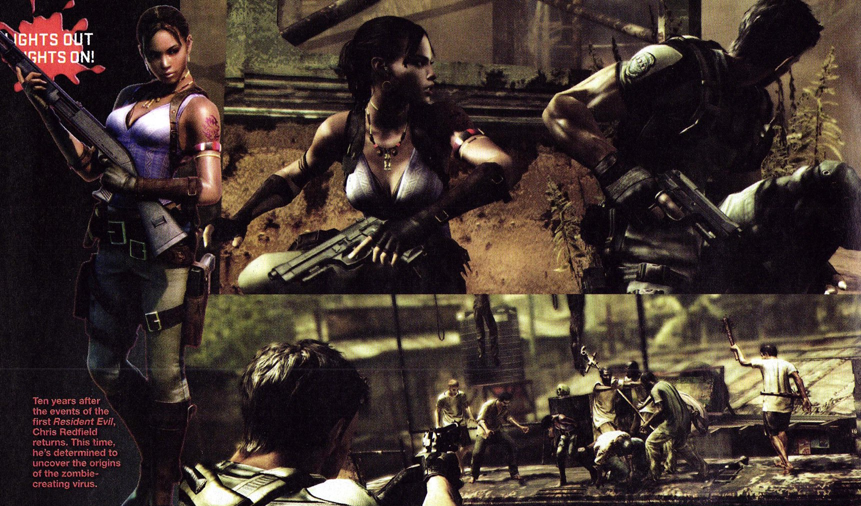
Teresa Dun

OTHER SHOCKERS

Ghostbusters

It might not be as easy to call the you-know-whos as Ray Parker, Jr.'s '80s hit theme song implies. In the 2008 Activision-Blizzard merger, *Ghostbusters* appears to have been lost in the shuffle. Various sources have promised that the game will eventually be released, but when and by whom are questions drifting through the air like ghosts waiting to be captured.

But don't lose hope! A game supported by such a star-studded cast (including Dan Aykroyd, Harold Ramis, Bill Murray, and Ernie Hudson) is bound to find a home somewhere. In the meantime, we'll put our Proton Packs on a shelf within reach (not back into the closet) to remind us of why we're so excited about what we believe will be the definitive *Ghostbusters* game, the one we've been waiting over two decades for.



Ten years after the events of the first *Resident Evil*, Chris Redfield returns. This time, he's determined to uncover the origins of the zombie-creating virus.

PREVIEW

RESIDENT EVIL 5

Ripping past clichés, one zombie at a time

| HANDS-ON | PS3 | RELEASE: March 2009 | GENRE: Action Survival | PUB: Capcom | DEV: Capcom

When you're in charge of a franchise as well known and successful as *Resident Evil,* you can afford to take a few risks for the sake of art or ambition. That's probably why *Resident Evil 5* is breaking several of the rules often found in survival horror (including traditions the franchise helped create). The first and most notable? Much of the game takes place in the daytime—not in fog or rain, but in sun-baked and labyrinthine African neighborhoods, with virus-infected zombies lumbering toward you beneath a bright blue sky. The second and more important change? You'll be aided by Sheva Alomar, a fully capable AI-controlled character who will toss you herbs when your health is low and pop a zombie with a shotgun when it tries to sneak up behind you…or Sheva Alomar, a real-life friend playing cooperatively with you online.

Now, you might be thinking, "two players (online or AI) in the daylight sounds more like a WWII shooter than a *Resident Evil* title…is the game still scary?" If my hands-on experience is any indication, the answer is a resounding, "Yes." Those crap-in-your-pants moments when you're hiding in a room—half-thinking you're "safe" because you've covered all potential entryways with flimsy wooden bookshelves—are more panic inducing than ever. Not only do the seemingly endless waves of enemies pour in from windows and doors, but they'll also crash through walls and leap through ceilings. Sun or no sun, and even with a friend, survival is far from guaranteed.

That brings me to the controls, known for being an additional cause of stress in *Resident Evil* games. In the build I tried, I still wasn't able to run and shoot at the same time—a trademark feature that I, personally, adore about the series. (My character is struggling to stay alive, so why should I have it easy? Plus, it makes the panic a little more real.) However, producer Jun Takeuchi has hinted at an evolved control scheme that newcomers to the series might find more welcoming. I just hope the game maintains the slow, tension-filled pacing that's made the franchise so famous.

Teresa Dun

SHOCKERS ON THE WAY

BioShock 2

DEV: 2K Marin

What we know: *BioShock* rocked. Creator Ken Levine isn't involved in *BioShock 2*, but a lot of the core team members have formed a new studio at 2K Marin (which led the port of the PS3 version). Not much is known about the gameplay or direction, but we know *BioShock 2* is in good hands.

SAW

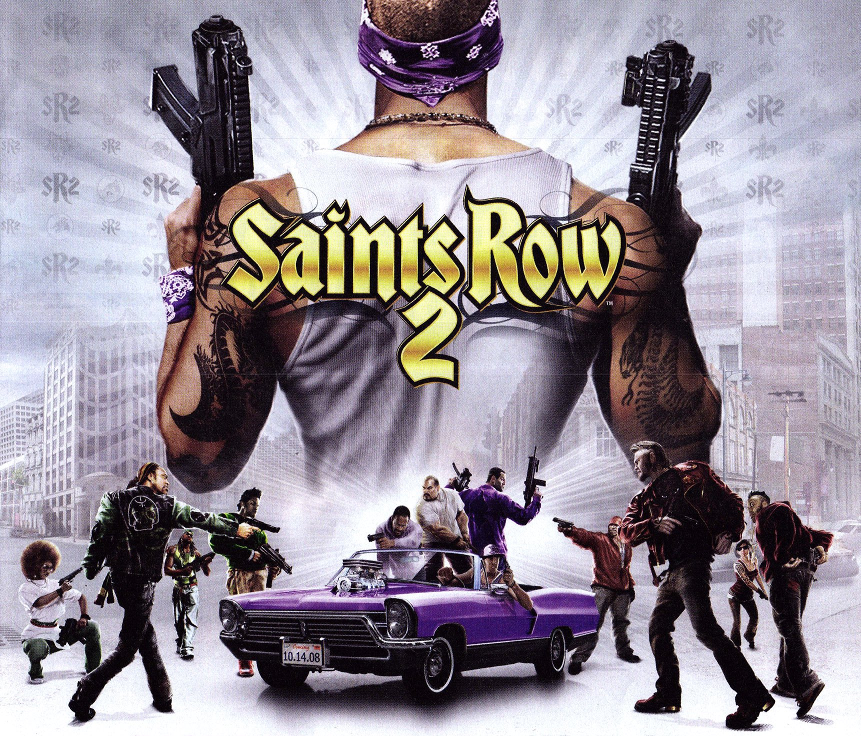
DEV: Brash Entertainment

What we know: Working as creative consultants for the game are Leigh Whannel (writer and actress in *SAW*) and James Wan (director of *SAW*). The game will answer questions posed in the *SAW* movie and its sequel.

Untitled Game

DEV: Grasshopper Manufacture

What we know: The Japanese company responsible for the visually pleasing *One Night Kiss, Samurai Champloo,* and *killer7* anime games is working on an yet untitled action horror game to be published by Electronic Arts. Former *Resident Evil* creator and producer Shinji Mikami is involved as well.



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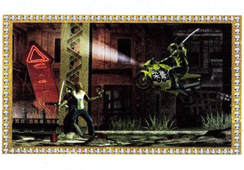

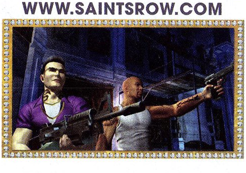

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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Sexual Content
Strong Language
Use of Drugs

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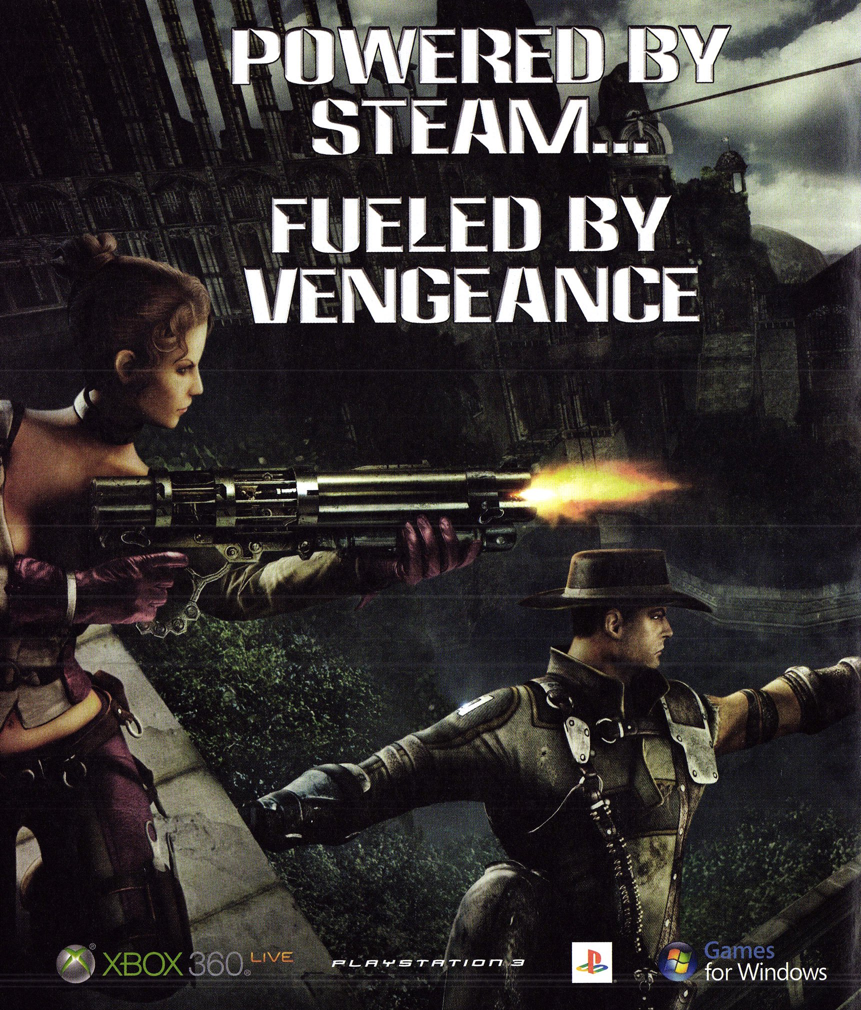

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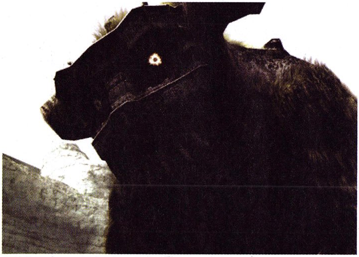
GamesRadar.com Top 7...

Bad guys you didn't want to kill

The gaming murders that left a bad taste in our mouths



The Colossi

Shadow of the Colossus

Most of these huge beasts are just minding their own business and only attack once provoked. Colossus 13 doesn't even retaliate, instead merely attempting to shake you off. They clearly feel pain too - stab them in the head and you'll know about it. Come on, one of them's even got a cool beard, yet you still killed it, didn't you? It's dead now. You did it. Shame on you.

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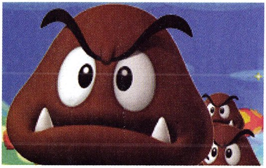


Goombas

Super Mario Bros.

If you stand still and they hit you, you die, but then that's true of buses and you don't go around stamping on them. You only get 100 points per kill too - the gaming equivalent of a $5.00 whole chicken. Has life really become so discounted?

GLaDOS

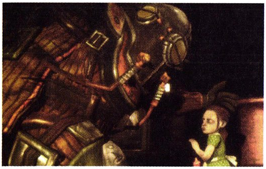
Portal

Just as hostages can come to bond with their captors, so you end up liking GLaDOS - the female-voiced computer in Portal, the Best Game Ever Made (TM). Guilt for killing her is prolonged because you have to do it a piece at a time. While she talks to you. (Sniff.)

Orbinaut

Sonic the Hedgehog

After these critters toss their spikes they're just cute, marshmallowy-looking creatures that just stare and slowly move forwards. They're now totally harmless. Are you really such a bastard that you'd kill them? Yep, us too. But we felt dirty afterwards.



Big Daddies

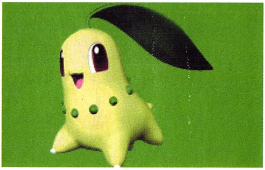
BioShock

They're huge, ugly, armed with a massive drill and turn violent with only the smallest provocation, but the Big Daddies still make us sad when they die. They're only protecting their Little Sister after all. 'Wake up, Mr Bubbles?' Sorry, ain't gonna happen.

Spotty Bulorb

Pikmin

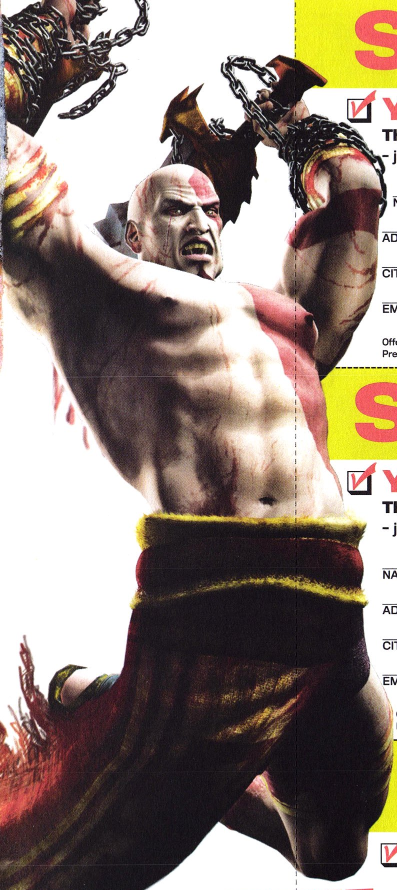
This is the angry mob lynching of gaming, The Spotty Bulorb is surrounded in its sleep, worn down and then killed. While its children watch! Or maybe you killed them first? OK, so it's just like nature. But nature can be so cruel.



Level 1

Pokemon

You've been playing for ages and you run into a low-level Pokemon. That's when you realise your super-powered team of fighters has become a remorseless unit. What chance does a level 2 Pidgey have against your level 67 Glaceon?



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Reviews

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RATINGS

★★★★★ LEGENDARY
A game so amazing, the entire PTOM staff recommends it. A must buy!

★★★★⯪ SUPERB
Not quite a timeless classic, but one of the finest of its breed.

★★★★ GREAT!
A finely crafted, thoroughly enjoyable experience. Worth your time and money.

★★★⯪ SOLID
A strong game. We noticed some flaws, but there's more to like than loathe.

★★★ ENJOYABLE
If the topic/license/style is your thing, there's enough to keep you entertained.

★★⯪ MEDIOCRE
An equal blend of sweet and sour. Discerning gamers can find better.

★★ SCARRED
A smattering of entertainment hidden amongst an abundance of flaws.

★⯪ FRUSTRATING
"Argh!" will be the self-created soundtrack of this game. No thank you.

★ PAINFUL
We played it so you don't have to. Now you owe us cookies.

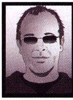
⯪ BROKEN
Hey, it comes in a free plastic box! Wee!

Recognize these faces? If so, email their names and why we chose them to PTOM_Letters@futureus.com for a chance to win random junk from Rob's desk. [Score!] Label your email "Famous Mugs" to qualify!

Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway p 74

Meet the experts delivering your buying advice

If duty called, who would the PTOM team select as their brother in arms?



ROB SMITH
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Since Rob imagines that he'd be commanding those in the foxholes (as opposed to actually *being* a grunt), Winston Churchill is his ideal brother in arms. "Between puffing on cigars and sipping on the finest scotches known to man, we'd ensure a decisive victory." AKA: Sitting around and waiting for the Americans to save their butts. Again.

NOW PLAYING: *MotorStorm: Pacific Rift, NBA 2K9, NBA 09: The Inside, The Last Guy*

TERESA DUN
ASSISTANT EDITOR

According to Teresa, it's unlikely that she'd ever be allowed into a real battle, because she'd shoot her own squadmates—totally accidentally, of course, but consistently. But despite her questionable aim, Teresa selects Aragorn because he would keep her alive. "During downtime, he could teach me, er, Elvish." Okay…

NOW PLAYING: *Soulcalibur IV* (yes, still!), *The Last Guy, Disgaea 3*

KEN BOUSQUET
ART DIRECTOR

If Ken's in the trenches, he wants a clutch performer by his side. Since magazine editors don't fit that bill, he'd sign Liverpool F.C.'s talismanic captain and midfield general, Stevie Gerrard (of England's Premier League, for non-soccerphiles). Ken would follow him into no-man's land in a heartbeat. After all, war may be hell, but so is a match on the pitch.

NOW PLAYING: *FIFA 09, Soulcalibur IV,* and he's been Folding a lot.

GARY STEINMAN
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

A battle buddy for the solitary ronin? Gary thinks not. Better to go it alone than risk discord and dishonor, he mumbled cryptically to his PTOM peers. Instead, Gary would simply carry a pocketful of Gysahl Greens to quickly summon a chocobo if ever necessary. That way he could scurry away from conflict while avoiding random battles, and thus survive to fight yet another day.

NOW PLAYING: *Prince of Persia, Valkyria Chronicles, Portal* (finally!)

ROGER BURCHILL
MANAGING EDITOR

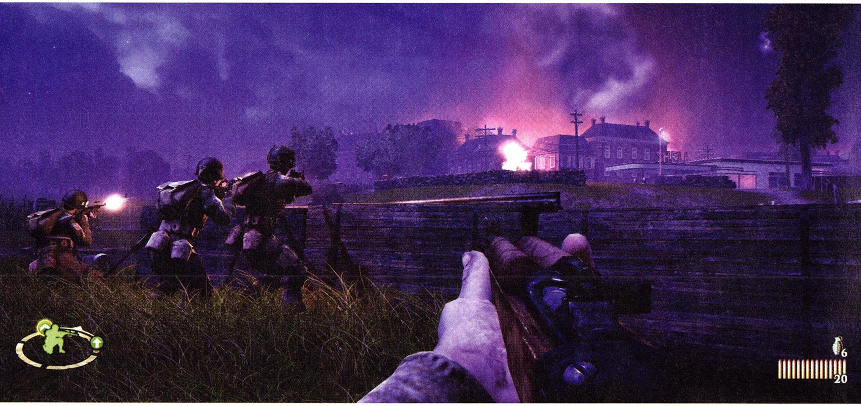
Oddball from the film classic *Kelly's Heroes* is Roger's BIA choice: "We see our role as essentially defensive in nature. While our armies are advancing so fast and everyone's knocking themselves out to be heroes, we are holding ourselves in reserve in case the Krauts mount a counteroffensive which threatens Paris...or maybe even New York." "Right on, bruddah!" says Rog.

NOW PLAYING: *BIA: Hell's Highway, MotoGP 08, NBA 09: The Inside* (PSP)

SCOTT BUTTERWORTH
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Scott says he'd pick Solid Snake to accompany him into battle. If the man can take down super-sophisticated nuclear-enabled tanks by himself, surely wiping out an army or two wouldn't be a problem. Besides, think of the stories he'd tell! Hunting snipers in Alaska...infiltrating mercenary armies in the Middle East...being replaced by some whiny kid named Raiden for no apparent reason. Talk about interesting!

NOW PLAYING: *Dead Space, Wipeout HD, BioShock*



Understanding and executing squad-level tactics and command is the key to victory...and survival.

Brothers in Arms:

Hell's Highway

Talk about a bad week to visit Holland...

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Mature PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: Gearbox Software

Operation Market-Garden. September, 1944. I'm in a sprawling meadow trying to rescue glider-crash survivors pinned down by heavy fire. I'm directing the advance of my Fire and Assault teams from cover to cover when I spot a German soldier's helmet peeking up from behind an emplacement several hundred yards away. It's a longshot. No chance in hell I'm going to hit him, but...I raise my M1 Garand rifle...steady my aim...and fire.

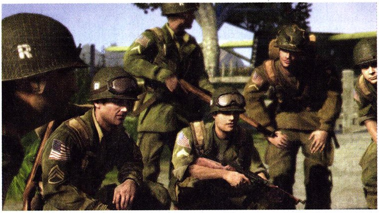
Thanks to *Brother in Arms: Hell's Highway's* Dramatic Moments system, I'm rewarded with a short, slow motion cutscene of my enemy's head disintegrating in a cloud of chunky red mist. While a small, outraged voice in me decries the inhumanity of war its cries are drowned out by the one that proudly and audibly exults, "Damn! What a shot!"

It's a personal high point in *Hell's Highway* that occurs relatively early in the game and one that I hoped would set a precedent for the battles to follow. After all, there's a lot to like here.

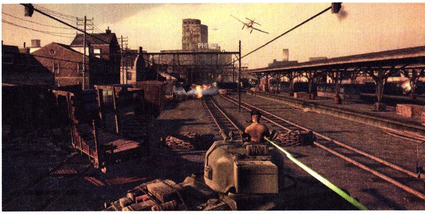
Brother in Arms fans will find the core experience in this third franchise installment (first on the PS3) familiar and enjoyable, as you continue the storyline that began on the D-day beaches of Normandy with Staff Sergeant Matt Baker and the men of his 101st Airborne Recon unit. The game's signature squad-based tactical command element offers a challenging contrast to the run-and-gun gameplay inherent to the genre, with battlefield success and survival dependent on how quickly and effectively you can ascertain the enemy's location and strength, analyze the terrain, and assign responsibilities to fire teams as you direct them to provide suppressing fire and neutralize the threat. Even on the easiest of the game's three difficulty settings, some areas are guaranteed to be a stiff tactical and trigger challenge.

As expected of a PS3 game, the most readily noticeable improvement in *Hell's Highway* are the graphics. The visuals hold up well against other WWII action game peers with detailed characters, equipment, and environments—the only demerit being an animatronic-quality to the main characters during the extended story cutscenes.

Still, as attractive as the game is to look at, the longer you spend surviving the tense field-to-town-to-building encounters the more you begin to notice its gameplay shortcomings. The dramatic



Hey, hey, the gang's all here...but not for long. Experience the burden of command through the eyes of S/Sgt. Matt Baker.



Occasional tank-based excursions offer a nice "blow stuff up" diversion, but aren't all that challenging since you can simply duck inside to avoid enemy fire.

moment I initially described should have set the stage for bigger and better events to come. But level after level, the gameplay revolves around three objectives: kill enemy soldiers, knock out 88mm gun emplacements, or destroy Panzer tanks. While the scenery may change, the objectives and the way you engage them do not. If the aim was to recreate the day-to-day grind of infantry life, *Hell's Highway* is a direct hit. Respite from the constant (and soon to be familiar feeling) squad-based fire fights is rare, consisting of the odd solo excursion where you rely on your shooting skills, and simplistic tank-driving levels where you get to blow stuff up.

The gnawing gameplay frustrations centered on design decisions rather than their effective implementation; but the more I played the more I wondered. I can understand not making the environments in the sandbox-mold since it would defuse the challenge and tension of combat situations. But I don't understand why elements within a given area are not completely accessible. Why are there buildings I can't enter or doors I can't break down? It would be a more gut-wrenching experience if it weren't obvious which buildings I could walk by without fearing for my life. Other world-undermining inconsistencies include the selective deformation system (see sidebar) and the arbitrary ability to jump over some obstacles but not others.

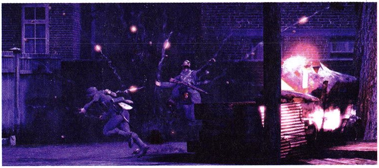
AI has been a point of complaint for the *BIA* series, and while there have been incremental improvements, it still needs work. Enemy soldiers aren't as predictable in timing and location when popping up from behind cover to take a shot, but they still remain stupidly exposed much too often. And where's the challenge in taking out a Panzer when it follows the same predictable circuit around town? (Hey, Fritz. Did a bazooka round just hit us? Let's go around the block again to check.) Squad-on-squad battles are only truly satisfying when your opponent is as skilled and as smart as you.

But the most questionable design decision is the squad command mechanism. To be fair, the point-at-location/target-to-direct-squad mechanic is a tried-and-true system that works, but it's more cumbersome than it needs to be. It's much too easy to inadvertently tap the L2 (Command) button during the heat of battle and accidently direct a squad into the enemy's kill zone (there are four optional pre-set control configurations, but none alleviate the problem completely.) Even when you mean to issue a command, sloppy aim will see your squad set up in front of a wall instead of behind it. There's no easy way to rescind a command once it's issued, and while the AI makes the best of bad situations, it's woefully inconsistent. Since the Tactical Map, which displays battlefield layout and enemy troop positions, is so frequently referenced during combat, it just makes more sense if you could use it to direct and position your squads as well.

Reviewing my list of hits and misses for *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway,* I'm astonished by how competent a game it is, but how inconsistent and unremarkable the experience ultimately felt to me. Perhaps that's to be expected for a game centered around Operation Market-Garden—a resounding Allied defeat where the only victory was surviving to fight another day. Both the story and gameplay arcs seemed pedestrian with the story focusing on character development and a revelation that wasn't particularly compelling, and the gameplay never crescendoing to a big payoff ending. Like Baker and his squad, I felt fatigued and unfulfilled after my journey down *Hell's Highway,* but consider it a holding action: The war goes on, and if Gearbox can continue to address AI issues and infuse the story and gameplay with a more epic arc and character, I'll still be eager to enlist for the next fight.

Roger Burchill

★★★½



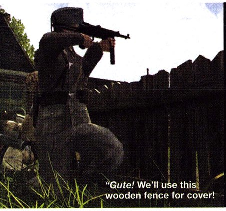
"Dramatic moments" are mini cutscenes that offer a more-detailed view of a particularly well-executed kill. More, please!

Complete the game and you'll be rewarded with an Authentic setting that removes all HUD info–necessitating a change in tactics when you replay the game.

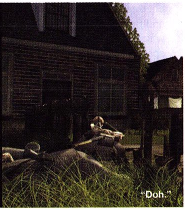
(In)complete Destruction

Hell's Highway's new deformation system means that you need to be selective about what you use for cover. Wooden fences, in particular, offer little protection from enemy fire and bullets can even pierce interior walls. Stone walls, steel barriers, and sandbag emplacements offer the best protection.

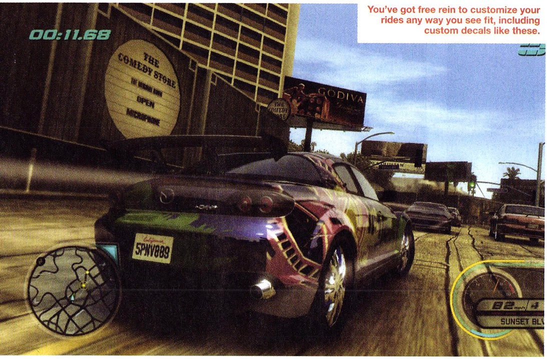
Unfortunately, while destructible cover is a nice, realistic addition, its implementation is puzzling at times. Bullets that shred a wooden barrel can't penetrate a couch that the enemy is hiding behind? (Apparently, the German's use Kevlar for furniture upholstery.) And while a stone wall stopping a bullet seems reasonable, the fact that an 88mm cannon round is stopped cold is ludicrous.



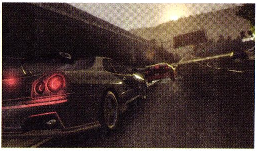
"Gute! We'll use this wooden fence for cover!"



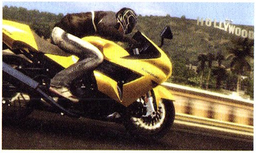
"Doh."



You've got free rein to customize your rides any way you see fit, including custom decals like these.



One of the most enjoyable parts of the game is drafting behind your opponents. Stick close for a turbo boost.



Motorbikes have an edge in speed, but crash easily.

Midnight Club: Los Angeles

The city, she loves you

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: Rockstar Games DEVELOPER: Rockstar San Diego

Among the open-world racing set, the *Midnight Club* series always managed to hit the right combination of style and substance. Set in a compacted (but still fairly accurate) version of L.A. that's teeming with pedestrians you can never quite hit, *Midnight Club: Los Angeles* casts you as a cocky wannabe out to win friends, cash, and cars on an illegal street-racing circuit. The basics are the same: Drive around the city looking for opponents, challenge them by flashing your brights, and then get ready to roar through point-to-point races. But this time the scope is bigger and the entire city bristles with realistic detail.

That realism isn't always a good thing, as *MC:LA* loses some of the series' over-the-top craziness and high-speed invincibility in the bargain. You could harmlessly bounce off oncoming traffic in *Midnight Club 3,* for example, but here you'll likely be treated to an elaborate, *Burnout*-style crash. That would be great if you didn't have to then watch all your opponents tear past while waiting to respawn and play catch-up.

Despite the crashing setbacks (which we'll chalk up to the game adding a more refined, demanding driving mechanic), *MC:LA* still manages to be a lot of fun. Even in compact form, L.A. is filled with blind alleys to cut through, hills to bomb down, and police to evade—all of which are a blast at eye-peeling speeds. And despite the realism, all the weird, fun driving abilities remain, such as drafting behind an opponent to build up a turbo boost or driving on two wheels.

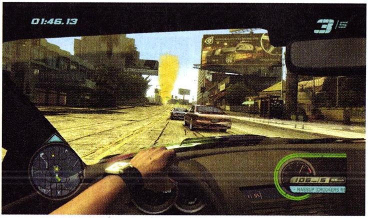
Best of all, *MC:LA* is huge. At any given time, there might be 20 or so racing events on the map to pursue, and it's often unclear what will advance the story. That's not even counting the customizable Arcade races, online play, or the race editor mode, all of which you can slip into at any time, with the winnings (including "Rep" experience points) transferring over to the career mode. And if you somehow get bored with that, you can spend hours tinkering with your cars, adjusting everything from their shocks and engines to the size of their rims and the amount of window tint. So long as you've got the skills (or beefy enough cars) to avoid crashing constantly, you can find an almost endless supply of fun on the streets of L.A.

Mikel Reparaz

★★★★

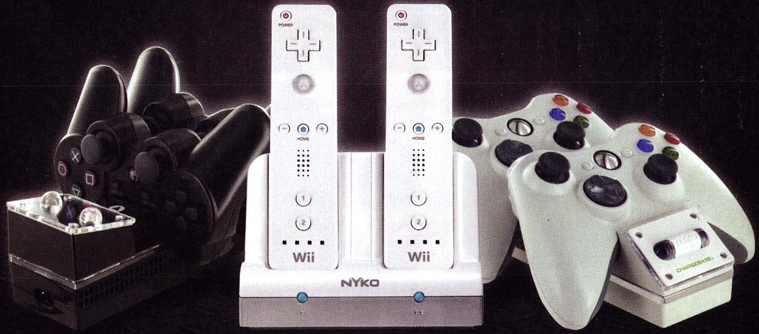
Get wrecked!

Like its predecessors, *MC:LA* features opponent-wrecking special abilities, which can be equipped one at a time and level up the more they're used. Agro, Zone, and Roar return from *MC3,* enabling you to bash enemies, slow time, and blast other vehicles off the road, respectively. Newcomer EMP, meanwhile, temporarily fries your opponents' electrical systems, making them swerve off-course. Simply awesome.



To appreciate just how highly detailed your cars are, examine the vehicle interiors with the new cockpit view.

MORE ASSAULT, LESS BATTERY.



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Valkyria Chronicles

The rules of engagement are about to change

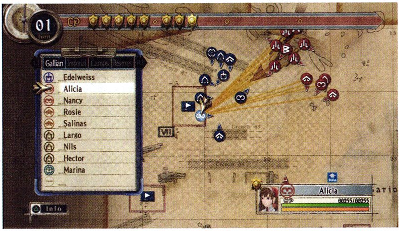
PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: Sega DEVELOPER: Sega

PS3 | R

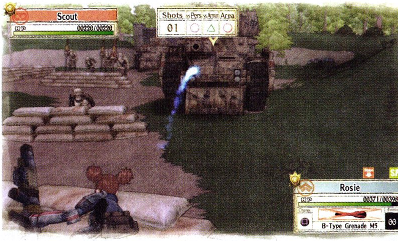
There's still hope. I'm staring down the ragnite-fueled barrel of the Batomys, a 245-ton, 20-meter-long, heavily armored brute of a tank. I can see no obvious weakness—no familiar blue incandescence signaling a vulnerable battery in the back, a standard feature on every tank I've encountered up until this point. And I'm running out of time. If I don't stop this colossus from rolling right over my ragtag squad and my makeshift encampments, I might as well toss in the towel for the entire independent nation of Gallia. Making matters worse, I've also heard over the radio that yet another hostile regiment is bearing down on us—quickly—so even if I do figure out how to eradicate the menace in front of me, I still need to squirrel away enough strength to face the threat to come.

This tense moment occurred in Chapter 7 of *Valkyria Chronicles,* during an epic, hard-fought, start-over-again-several-times battle that seemed hopeless at first. But as I said before, there's always hope, because in the first eight or so hours leading up to this intense tussle—and in the dozens of hours afterward—*Valkyria* revealed itself to have one of the most dynamic battle systems I've ever encountered in a Japanese tactical RPG. No matter what the situation and no matter what the odds (in this particular case, stacked absurdly against you), there's always a way to win... No, make that *several* ways to win.

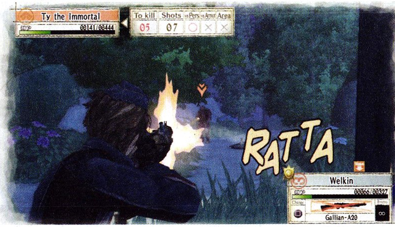
Quick hint for when you get to this battle: Try sneaking a sniper along the cliff face and into the Batomys' blind spot (avoid those machine gun turrets!), then climb on top of the enemy tank and use it as a perfect perch to pick off those soldiers lurking on the next ledge. As for what to do next? I'll leave that up to you, soldier.



The orange lines represent Alicia's lines of sight: You can actually see each of the enemy soldiers, tanks, and turrets indicated here once you activate your plucky Scout.



A grenade won't do much damage to a tank, but at least Rosie is tossing her explosive from behind cover. Otherwise, she'd be a sitting duck for enemy fire.



Squad 7 will see a wide variety of battles, from surreptitious stealth missions to all-out urban assaults. Choosing the right soldiers is essential. Just like you wouldn't want to face a tank with a lowly Mechanic, you also don't need a Lancer to sneak up on unsuspecting foes.

Don't diss the Scout! Not only are they essential for, uh, scouting, but if you level them up, they gain a very powerful weapon that'll change the way you play the game.

Battlefield bliss

War is a time of hope. I know…that sounds a bit backward. But really, it is. After all, you need to believe that despite the brutality, the mayhem, the disruption, the death, something good will come out of it. If not, why bother fighting at all?

That's one of the central themes that weaves through *Valkyria Chronicles'* multilayered story, and coincidentally it's a remarkably relevant theme for the state of the JRPG among U.S. gamers. What was once a lively genre has gotten stale, fallen to the wayside, desperately crying out for relevance. Enter *Valkyria,* which radically overhauls the tactical RPG combat system and in the process revitalizes the genre—at least for this gamer.

What's so special about combat? First off, it's fully 3D. Gone are the checkerboard tiles that demarcate your position—but that's just the beginning. The trenches dip below the ground, the mountains soar above, the grass provides genuine cover, as do sandbags, city walls, trees, and trucks. In other words, what you see is what you get. No more gaudy, contrived "fog of war" obscuring your view of the battlefield. Instead, send a Scout deep into enemy territory and you'll see whatever that Scout sees. But if that Scout is killed, you'll have no idea what's going on beyond that next ridge. And the same goes for the enemy: If they don't see you, they won't attack you. Plan accordingly.

The other big innovation: Combat happens in real time. Yes, you're still taking turns, using your Command Points to move your troops around, then when you're done, waiting for the enemy to go through his round. But once you actually select a soldier—be it a well-rounded Shocktrooper, tank-crushing Lancer, or any of the other three classes—the battlefield jumps to life. You move in real time, hustling as bullets whiz by, ducking for cover in the face of sniper fire and mortar shells, sneaking behind a foe when you can, and pulling that trigger once you're in position. Not only does this add a thrilling new sense of danger to the offensive portion of tactical RPGs, but it plays a significant role in your defensive setups as well. Nothing beats the immense satisfaction you get when your perfectly placed troops pick off enemy soldiers as they charge your front, without your having to make a single additional move. It almost feels as good as a long-distance one-shot kill from a hidden Sniper. Almost.

A familiar story

Yet despite the innovative battles, *Valkyria* does stick to form when it comes to the story itself—or, more to the point, how it tells the story. The unique and gorgeous visuals aside, *Valkyria* is painfully traditional in the way it segments off its narrative, pushing it out in discrete, completely non-interactive bits. It's also chockablock with JRPG and anime clichés, including one of my all-time faves, the beach getaway, complete with skimpy bikinis and plenty of blushing all around. And make sure you're ready to read: All the cutscenes are competently voice-acted, but you'll also encounter page after page of text-based background material covering everything from the details of your weaponry to dossiers on your squad mates.

But that's not necessarily a bad thing when you consider that despite the too-familiar trappings, the story is a real hoot: an alternate take on Europe on the eve of World War II, but in this particular Europe, ragnite is the precious energy resource that's driving everyone mad for conquest. *Valkyria's* tale also moves in several interesting and unexpected directions—but like many RPGs, it's as much a vehicle for the stereotypical (yet exceedingly likable) characters to grow and develop as it is an end unto itself.

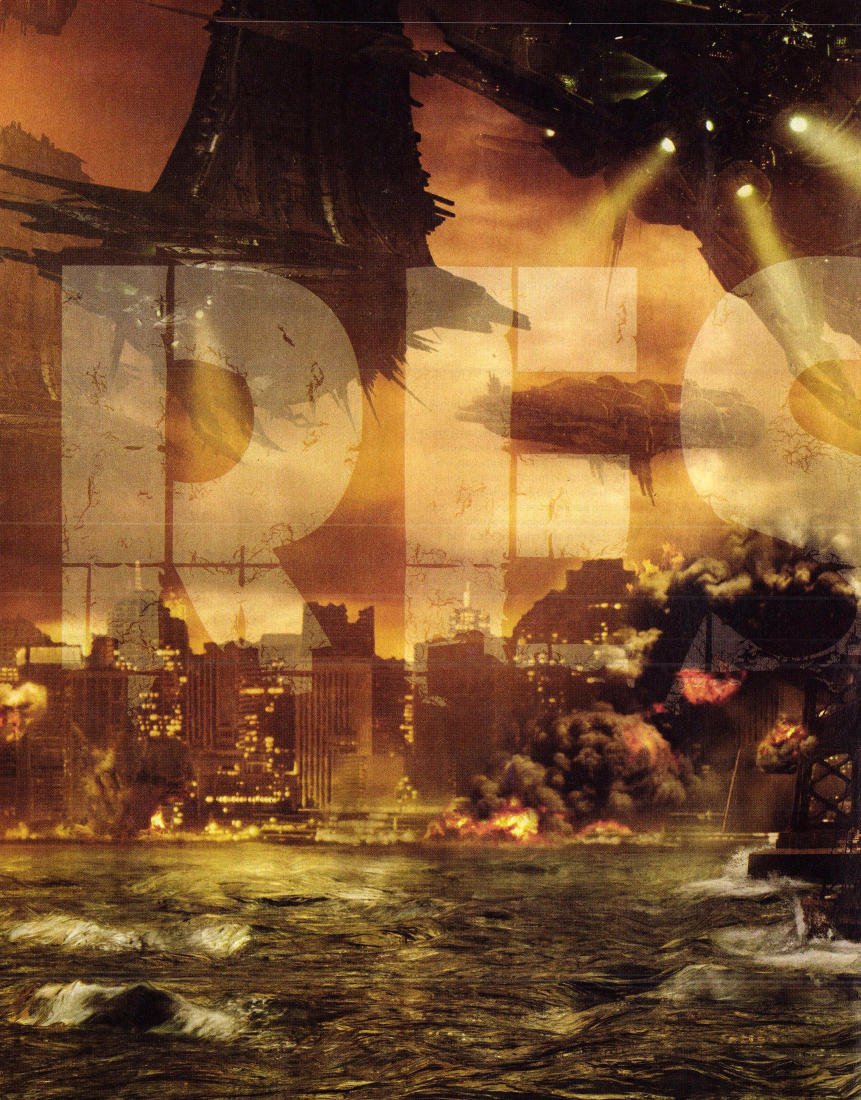
And truth told, having some familiar genre conventions can be somewhat comforting to PlayStation JRPG fans desperately hoping for the next great gaming fix. Especially when they come with a battle system so refreshingly unique and utterly addictive.

Gary Steinman

★★★★½

No man left behind

With 100 possible recruits to rotate into and out of your squad of 20 soldiers, you'd think it'd be tough to keep them all at the same level. *Valkyria Chronicles* does away with the benchwarmer conundrum by allowing you to allocate your experience points to an entire class of soldier—so, say, all of your Lancers will level up as one group. This moves the focus away from monotonous level-grinding and on to strategic troop selection and battle deployment, which is a monumental task in itself, because you have to balance out affinities (which squad mates get along best) with Potentials (innate skills and deficiencies, like Camp Defender, Desert Allergy, even proclivities for different sexes). Simple, efficient, brilliant.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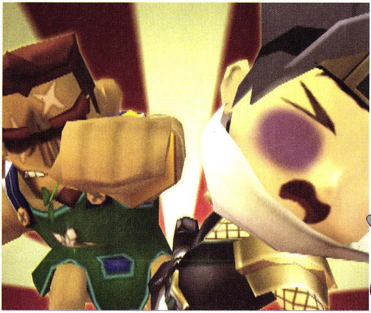
You can customize your character's appearance by choosing a color scheme and face type, like "sexy face."



The top earner wins Princess Penny's hand in marriage and the key to the kingdom.

Dokapon Kingdom

More money, more problems

PS2 PRICE: $39.99 ESRB: Everyone 10+ PUBLISHER: Atlus DEVELOPER: Sting

PS2 | R
PSP | R

Simplicity reigns supreme in *Dokapon Kingdom,* with simple combat, a simple story, and a simple goal: earn more money than anyone else. It's an RPG built around multiplayer competition, where up to four friends trek across a board–game-like map, battling monsters and capturing towns.

In the rock-paper-scissors-style battles, opponents take turns attacking and defending. If the moves each player chooses match up (a normal attack is met with a normal defense, a magic spell with a magic guard, or a strike with a counter), the defense succeeds, otherwise the attacker wins. For monster encounters, you can try to make predictions by viewing its stats, but choosing "correctly" boils down to luck. Predicting friends' moves can be as psychologically complex as your imagination permits.

Two-player games tend to quickly become unbalanced, as whomever leads early on easily widens the gap, leaving the straggler with little hope of recovery. With three or four players, balance occurs naturally because the leader must constantly fend off multiple assailants, but the trade off is excessively long waits between turns.

Dokapon's fatal flaw is its wait-to-play ratio; since actual engagement between players happens rarely, watching three players take their turns while you twiddle your thumbs wears thin fast. Even if you're playing alone, AI characters often take leisurely strolls through the item shops while your eyes glaze over and your irritation mounts. RPG fans are accustomed to taking turns, but taking turns to take turns pushes the limits of patience.

Most palatable in short bursts, *Dokapon's* quickplay modes are best, such as Battle Royale, where everyone races toward specific goals like capturing a particular town or racking up the most kills in a set time. Lonely gamers may squeeze some fun out of playing with friends, and the traditional-RPG-turned-party-game format is certainly novel, but unfortunately it's just that—simply a novelty.

Carolyn Gudmundson

★★

Character classes like thief, cleric, and warrior grant special abilities, and you can switch classes anytime by visiting the castle.

The canned animations can make it look like your characters are having seizures.

Valhalla Knights 2

Second time around—but still no Vikings

PSP PRICE: $29.99 ESRB: Everyone 10+
PUBLISHER: XSEED Games, Marvelous Ent.
DEVELOPER: K2

I still shudder when I recall the harsh learning curve of the first *Valhalla Knights,* where I had to navigate numerous menus just to perform magic (the real-time action didn't pause in menu screens, and even if you chose to hotkey a spell, it still took just as long to cast), all without a sufficient tutorial. Sadly, that hasn't improved the second time around.

The real-time battles might lull you into thinking the game's a hack 'n' slash adventure, but I got wise after spending three hours grinding to earn enough money to hire a party—and then another few hours squinting at the extensive stats menus. Seriously, if this dungeon crawled any slower, it'd be going backward.

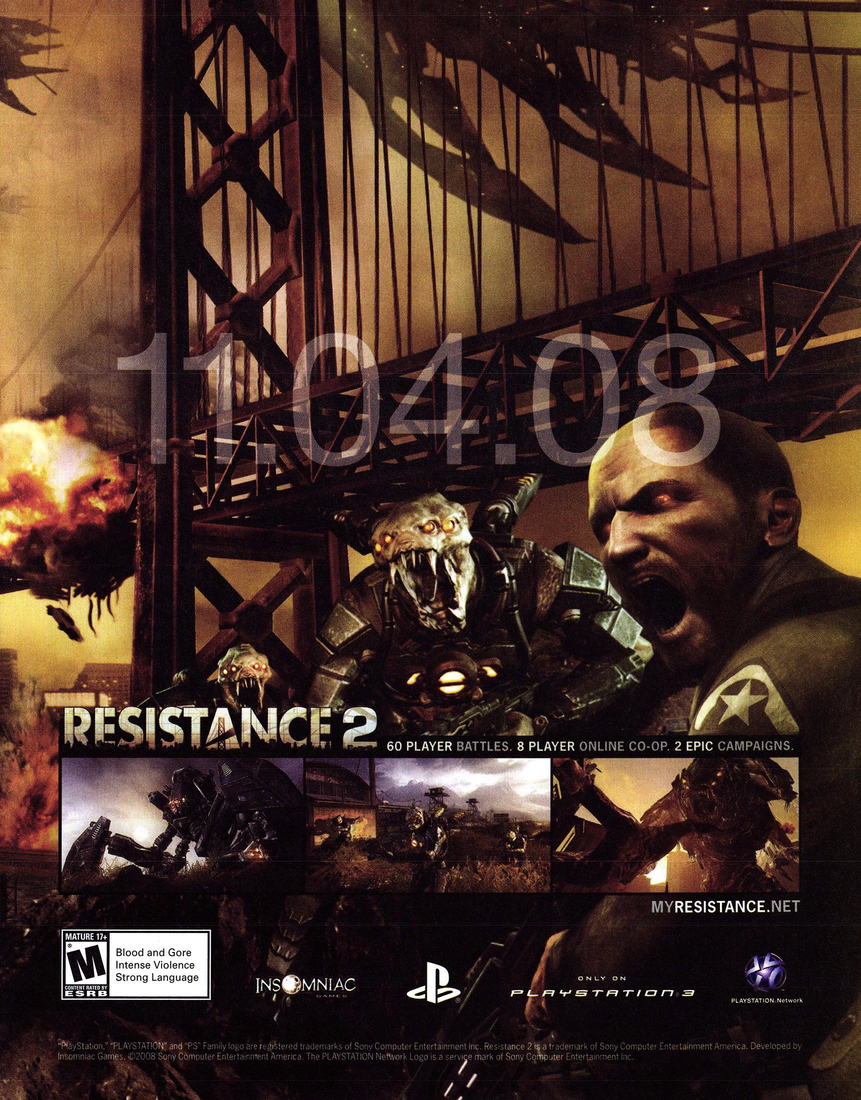
If you're in it for the multiplayer (up to two, in either co-op or versus modes), you might enjoy sharing the experience with a friend. But the rest of us will be disappointed no matter how many hours we sink into the game.

AJ Glasser

★★

You need to control your entire party: switch between them using the left shoulder button. Too bad the controls are so clunky.

Every time your characters die in *Valhalla Knights 2,* it costs a small fortune to resurrect them! Yay, more grinding for cash! (That's sarcasm, by the way.)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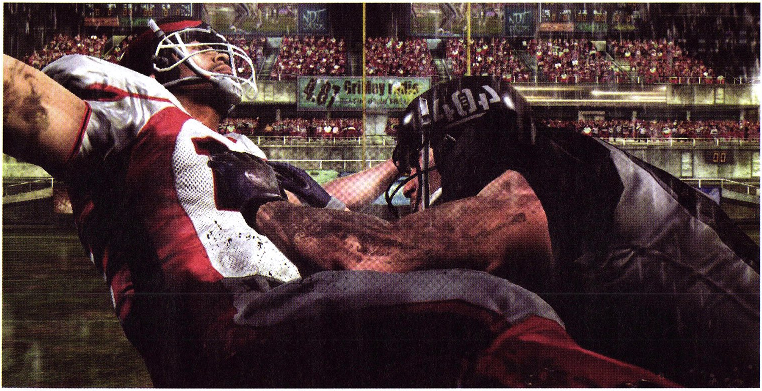


The weather effects are pretty detailed; play in the rain and your players will slowly build up a layer of very realistic-looking mud.

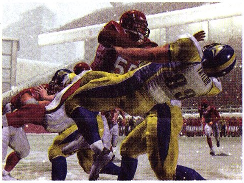
Former NFL players, including Lawrence Taylor and Bill Romanowski, provide some of the player voices in *The League II.*

Blitz:

The League II

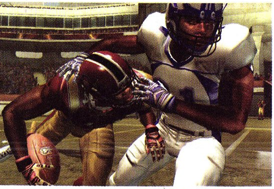
Still waiting for more of that old *Blitz* magic

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Mature PUBLISHER: Midway DEVELOPER: Midway



Dirty hits earn icons for your team, which fill the Unleashed meter—allowing for even dirtier hits and spectacular plays.

When the original *NFL Blitz* hit the arcades, it was an absolute blast. This was football stripped down to its basest (and, arguably, most entertaining) level; you didn't need to worry much about strategy, just put the ball in motion and watch the sparks fly. Over the years, though, the series has become both more complex and (marginally) more realistic. While that evolution brings its own entertainment—and unquestionably greater depth—some of that pure, simple fun of the original game has been lost.



Blitz tackles would *definitely* be discouraged by the NFL.

Such is the case with *Blitz: The League II,* a brutal game of no-holds-barred football that makes marginal improvements over its 2005 PS2 predecessor but still finds that old *Blitz* magic out of reach. The game's got plenty going for it. For one, it looks fantastic, with spectacularly detailed characters both on-field and in the melodramatic story segments of the Campaign mode. The stadiums look realistic, with beautiful weather effects that impact both the play mechanics and the appearance of the players. And those painfully detailed injury animations, all snapping bone and spraying blood, are always cringe-worthy.

The story in Campaign mode is reasonably entertaining, and the writing and voice work are all topnotch. Jay Mohr, as your character's agent, is particularly good—and speaking of the voice work, Frank Caliendo's Madden-on-speed color commentary is laugh-out-loud funny.

If only the actual gameplay were as excellent. *The League II* offers little new over its predecessor; in terms of gameplay, it pretty much comes down to injury-treatment mini-games, post-play "beatdowns", and the ability to occasionally target a specific body part for abuse when tackling. The real problem, though, is that the controls can be so unreliable. Runners can get stuck in crowds, tackle attempts can go ridiculously off-target, and trying to maneuver a player under a tipped ball is infuriating thanks to what appear to be unbreakable running animations.

This sort of thing doesn't happen all the time, but it was enough to shake my faith in the ability to effectively complete plays consistently. I felt like the game was frequently taking control out of my hands. Ultimately, *The League II* seems to be trying to have it both ways, to be realistic in some areas and over-the-top in others. The result is a mish-mash that is at times awkward and frustrating. It's entertaining when all's working as it should, but that just doesn't happen as often as it should.

Joe Rybicki

★★★

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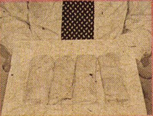

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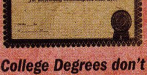

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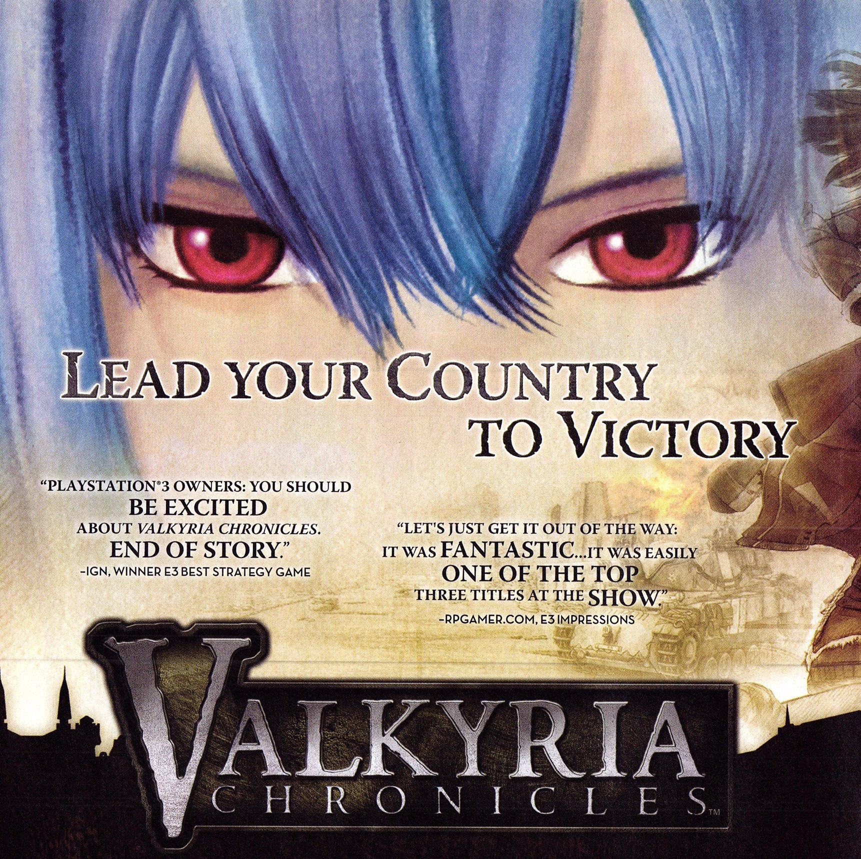

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Shots
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Shots
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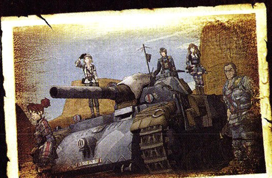

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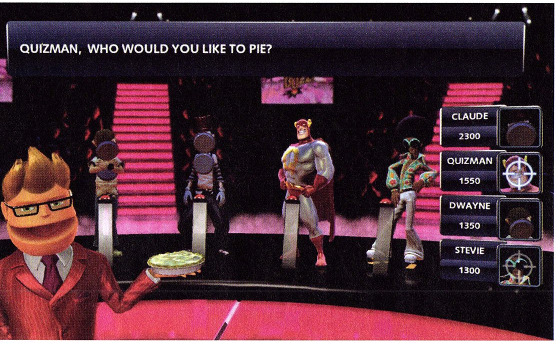


Pro Tip for throwing pies: Aim for the character above the one you're actually trying to hit. If only two people are left, aim for yourself. I'm totally serious!

We'll upload a PTOM quiz when the game goes live. Look for details about where to find it in next issue's Network section!

Buzz! Quiz TV

Trivia buzzing from couch to couch

PS3 **PRICE:** $59.99 (including controllers) **ESRB:** Teen **PUBLISHER:** SCEA **DEVELOPER:** Relentless Software

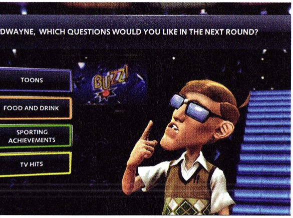
At first glance, *Buzz! Quiz TV* might seem limited. After all, it's got only one multiplayer mode when eight (or fewer) people are playing on a single console—the same Pie Fight, Point Stealer, Short Fuse, and other rounds that you've seen in previous *Buzz!* games, all packaged in an uncustomizable, pre-determined seven-round game—along with a lackluster single-player mode that includes no sense of progression whatsoever (you might as well be playing with flashcards). That said, the game more than makes up for those shortcomings with its beefy online support.

Jockey to the top of the single-player leaderboard (oh boy, all the trivia junkies are going to love showing off their "skill," or rather, I should say, their dorkiness) or participate in online *Buzz!* trivia battles (the Sofa vs. Sofa mode supports up to four players). You can also download new questions, characters, outfits, and other goodies in Quiz Packs that will be released. The most exciting feature, however, is the ability to create your own quizzes (go to MyBuzzQuiz.com to find out how), upload them online, have them rated, and also download quizzes that other players have made.

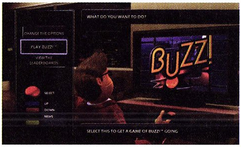
The trivia, graphics, and over-the-top game show razzle-dazzle are up to the usual *Buzz!* par, and Buzz himself is as suave and charming a quiz host as ever. With the new online-friendly additions, *Buzz! Quiz TV* deserves to be in any trivia fan's library.

Teresa Dun

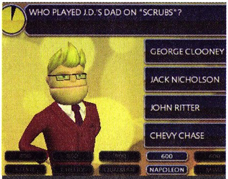
★★★★



My favorite category? Videogames! That one'll be available for download shortly after the game's release (along with some extra costumes).



The menu interface is actually the great Buzz himself surfing through some TV channels. I like how he uses the *Buzz!* controller as a remote.



Quiz Host mode includes questions like "Can you guess what color I'm thinking of?" and lets the host decide who receives the points.

Buzz! Master Quiz

No buzzer, but still Buzz!

PSP **PRICE:** $19.99 **ESRB:** Everyone 10+ **PUBLISHER:** SCEA **DEVELOPER:** Relentless Software

What's the best way to adapt a party game to the PSP? By adding a light 'n' breezy single-player campaign and making multiplayer a cinch for anyone to hop into—PSP owner or not. That's what Relentless Software seems to believe, and after spending more hours than strictly necessary testing *Buzz! Master Quiz,* I'm inclined to agree.

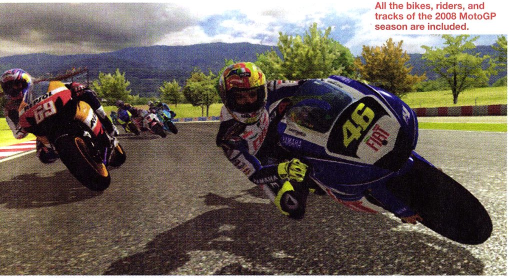
Master Quiz introduces a single-player mode that includes 15 different stages. Instead of straightforward trivia, some stages require you to identify pictures, view film clips, and more, which adds a vital layer of variety to the game.

The best part, though, is the multiplayer. Up to six can participate, but only one *Buzz!* UMD is required. Ever. In Pass Around, you pass a single system from player to player while answering a variety of interactive questions. Quiz Host lets one player act as the, er, quiz host, reading questions and managing the points of the six contestants. Lastly, Game Sharing lets up to four players (again, still using only one *Buzz!* UMD) participate in a customizable round of Fastest Finger on their own PSP systems.

Buzz! Master Quiz is a title that anyone interested in portable party games should consider, whether you're a parent needing a diversion for the kids in the car or a PSP owner looking to flex your trivia muscles.

Teresa Dun

★★★★



All the bikes, riders, and tracks of the 2008 MotoGP season are included.

MotoGP 08

Masochistic racers: Your ride has arrived

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: Capcom DEVELOPER: Milestone

As a long-time racing fan, I don't often get my butt kicked by any game set on wheels, but *MotoGP 08* had me cursing from the get go. And not because of any noteworthy gameplay deficiencies—winning races aboard these uber-powered bikes is just plain hard.

Car racing fans will quickly discover that motorcycle racing has its own inherent demands, where setting up the correct line and negotiating your way past other riders is exponentially more challenging. Success in *MotoGP* requires dedicating an inordinate amount of time to acclimate yourself to its intricate control dance of steering, throttle, and braking inputs (not just one brake button, but two: front and rear).

Interestingly, the game also has two separate difficulty settings—one for the opponent AI and one for the performance characteristics of your own motorcycle. Mixing and matching the settings means races can always be competitive, but mastering your own ride is a challenge, even in the "easy" Arcade mode. Count on ridiculous hours of practice if you want even a glimpse of the pack with the settings on Champion and Simulation.

As racing games go, *MotoGP* comes well equipped with the standard range of Quick (single) Race, Time Attack, and Championship (season) modes. The 50-item Challenge mode is an additional entertaining diversion, but the payoff of a real-life GP photo for each surmounted challenge is a letdown. Career mode is where the simulation experience really blooms as you create a rider and work your way up the ranks of the 125cc and 250cc classes to the top-tier MotoGP level. There are no shortcuts in this mode, as you'll need to run qualifying races and tune your bike to match the specific track characteristics if you want to succeed in the actual races. Multiplayer is a strictly online affair, but the ability to use your tuned Career mode ride is an appreciated touch.

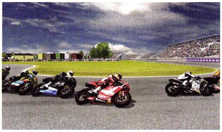
So what's not to like about a supremely-challenging hardcore motorcycle simulation? Well, setting aside *MotoGPs* ego-deflating challenge curve, there's simply not much in the way of an emotional payoff for succeeding. I managed to win a season championship (ahem, admittedly, on Arcade setting) with the only reward being top billing on the leaderboard. (How about a freakin' trophy ceremony at least?!)

Motorcycle-specific racing fanatics will lose themselves in *MotoGP's* depth of details, but most gamers will find the practice-requisite experience an oddly passionless grind.

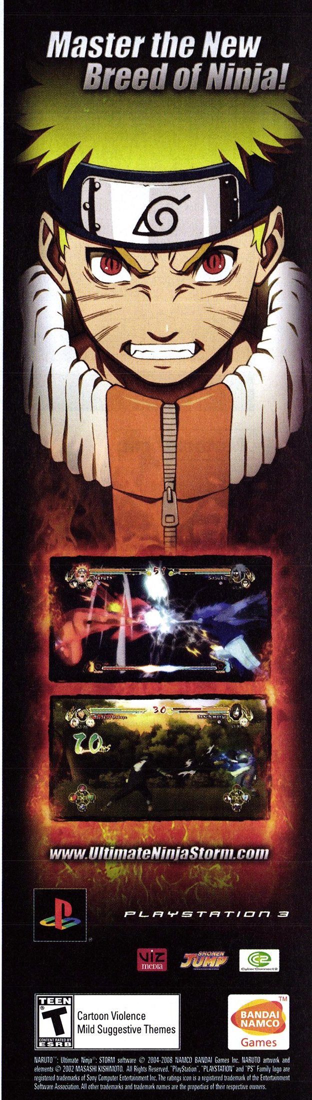
Roger Burchill

★★★½

Grand Prix motorcycles are purpose-built racing machines, as opposed to the modified versions of road-going motorcycles utilized in the Superbike World Championship series.



Automobile racers beware: There's a whole new level of precision required to navigate through a pack of motorcycles.



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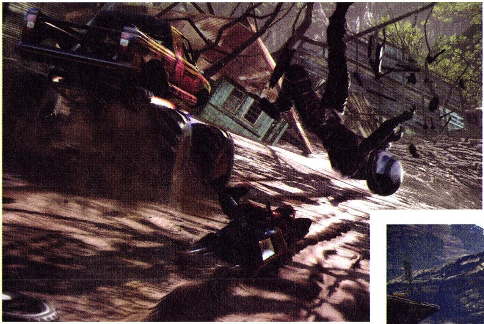
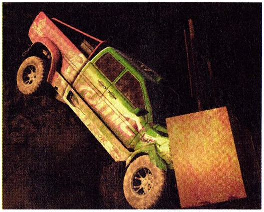
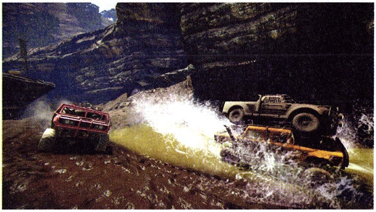
Most of the maps look visually sharp, and deforming cars in the slow-mo crash-cam can elicit "oohs" and "ahhs" but it won't be long until you'll skip them in a jiffy amid "ugghhs" and "@*&!*s!"







Trophy support rewards you for winning races in each vehicle type, as well as crashing (failing), hitting leaps, and more.

MotorStorm:

Pacific Rift

An iterative addition to the competitive racing field

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: Evolution Studios

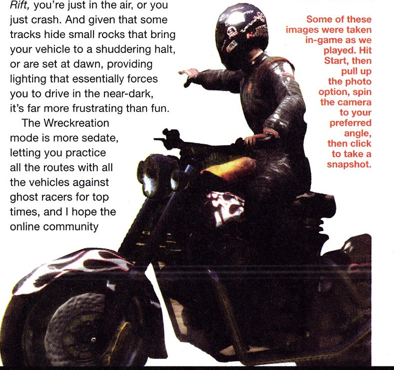
The positive sales and even critical reception enjoyed by the original *MotorStorm* release on PS3 was certainly aided by its being first-to-market for racing fans on their shiny new systems. Now, with a healthy catalogue of racers on store shelves, this sequel—or more accurately, this 1.5 upgrade—really needed to bring the proverbial "it." Racing on a beautifully-detailed Pacific island, across four elemental-themed Festival circuit locations, *MotorStorm: Pacific Rift* supplies eight core vehicle types and a format that builds just incrementally on the original release.

You pick a driver from a few personality-deprived options (new similarly bland additions are unlocked with various race successes) and head to the earth, air, fire, or water stages to take part in one of two open races, with more unlocked as you finish in the top three. Like the original *MotorStorm,* each track provides a couple of different routes, some suited to particular vehicles (tight spaces that only a bike or quad could easily fit through, for example). You're able to choose a vehicle type from set options for that track but you can still find yourself racing against monster trucks... and bigger. That matters when a large piece of the racing strategy involves bumping any of the other 15 vehicles in the race. To get out of harm's way, or to get ahead, you manage a boost meter that will cause your vehicle to explode if you push it too far into the red (though driving through water cools your meter whereas zipping over lava causes it to hit the danger red zone faster).

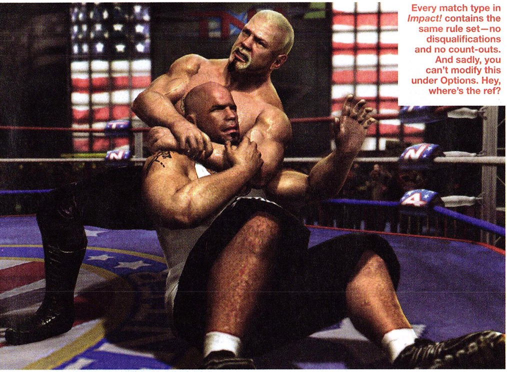
Like in the original, slow-motion wipeouts add visual flair to your crashes. Pity they a) are too frequent, and b) only showcase failure. That's my core complaint with *Pacific Rift's* progression as you level up (unlocking vehicle types and drivers) with each race win, place, or show: it seems to have forgotten that *Burnout* is the only racer to ever make crashing (failing) fun, and integrates it into the gameplay. Similarly, *Pure*'s addition of aerial tricks gives purpose to catching air. In *Pacific Rift,* you're just in the air, or you just crash. And given that some tracks hide small rocks that bring your vehicle to a shuddering halt, or are set at dawn, providing lighting that essentially forces you to drive in the near-dark, it's far more frustrating than fun.

The Wreckreation mode is more sedate, letting you practice all the routes with all the vehicles against ghost racers for top times, and I hope the online community flourishes to generate ongoing support. But the core racing experience makes the misstep of celebrating failure rather than making the actual winning of races definable fun. Rob Smith

★★★



Some of these images were taken in-game as we played. Hit Start, then pull up the photo option, spin the camera to your preferred angle, then click to take a snapshot.



Every match type in *Impact!* contains the same rule set—no disqualifications and no count-outs. And sadly, you can't modify this under Options. Hey, where's the ref?

TNA Impact!

Six sides can barely contain the mediocrity

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: Midway DEVELOPER: Midway Los Angeles

Every wrestling fan should have been looking forward to Midway doling out some healthy competition to THQ's annual *WWE SmackDown* franchise. After all, you'd think that if TNA (Total Nonstop Action) can provide exciting wrestling on a weekly basis, then surely their debut game, *TNA Impact!,* would match the best of THQ's offerings. Unfortunately, a rollicking "real-life" version doesn't necessarily translate to a compelling game.

TNA's arcadey controls (face buttons for attacks, L1 to add a Strong modifier) provide a simplistic move set that ultimately proves too shallow. You can only button-mash for so long before the rubberbanding AI starts reversing your entire offense by spamming the same moves repeatedly. Furthermore, even on the easiest difficulty setting, *Impact!* is aggressively unbalanced. You might manage to whittle down your opponent's health only to have them somehow kick their way out of a pin—even after a finisher! Outside the ring, opponents are dumber than a box of hammers, a claim illuminated by the way they sprint right into the steel steps if they're given chase. Tag matches are even worse… I shouldn't be able to pin my opponent mere feet away from his partner!

The rest of *Impact!* reads like a laundry list of disappointing features. Only nine Exhibition modes are available and each plays similarly, including the so-so Ultimate X match. You can't defend belts. Chairs are your only weapons. Create A Wrestler is severely gimped and doesn't support female grapplers. Even Story (not Career) mode is inadequate, depressingly linear, and boring. Oh yeah, no blood either. Or Trophy support. And Online only lets you go one-on-one without CAWs.

On the plus side, *Impact!* is absolutely gorgeous. Utilizing the Unreal Engine, Midway has deftly recreated TNA's roster of well-known beefcake brawlers (Sting, Christian Cage) and soon-to-be-known gladiatorial hardbodies (Samoa Joe, AJ Styles). The results are scarily realistic with every freckle and imperfection perfectly mapped to each grappler's body.

At best, *Impact!* will barely meet your expectations for what a wrestling game should encompass in 2008. Every facet feels like it was prepped with a sequel in mind, and while we have no doubt that an improved follow-up is in the works, why not make the first *Impact!* that much better?

Shane Patterson

★★½

The TNA roster is relatively small, with only about 25 wrestlers making the cut. Midway has promised more with future DLC.

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BANDAI NAMCO Games

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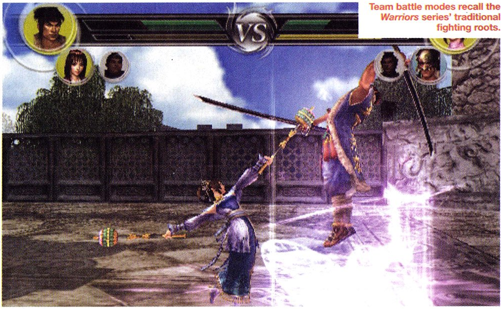


Team battle modes recall the *Warriors* series' traditional fighting roots.

A PSP port of *Warriors Orochi 2* is slated for Japanese release in November, so don't be surprised if we see it early next year.

Warriors Orochi 2

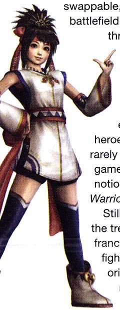
Fresh diversions make for a slightly improved sequel

PS2 PRICE: $29.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: KOEI DEVELOPER: Omega Force

PS2 | R
PSP | R

Act surprised: KOEI has released a sequel to one of its *Warriors* games. This time around, it's the follow-up to *Warriors Orochi,* which brought together the mythologies of the *Dynasty Warriors* and *Samurai Warriors* series last fall, teaming ancient Chinese and Japanese heroes in a hack-and-slash battle against the demon lord Orochi and his endless waves of goons.

Almost nothing has changed in the course of a year, and truly, most of the elements of *Warriors Orochi 2* could be mixed and matched with those of its predecessor without discrepancy. Each mission tosses your trio of swappable, historical brawlers onto a giant battlefield, tasked with fighting their way through hundreds of bland enemies in an effort to find and eliminate generals and other marked villains. As we've come to expect from the myriad *Warriors* games, rote button-mashing defines the experience, and despite unique heroes and weapons, the strategies rarely differ from mission to mission. The game does very little to dispel the notion that if you've played one *Warriors* game, you've played them all.



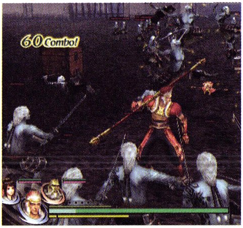
Still, *Warriors Orochi 2* slightly bucks the trend of diminishing returns for the franchise by implementing traditional fighting modes—a throwback to the original *Dynasty Warriors* game released for PSone in 1997. While we wouldn't put them toe-to-toe with *Soul Calibur* or any other premier fighting franchise, they're a nice diversion, especially with a buddy on the second controller. Another mode even lets you race horses around the battlefield!

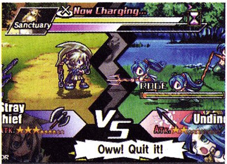
Fans should be overjoyed with the mass of available content: the five distinct, co-op compatible story campaigns (including one for Orochi himself) and more than 90 customizable characters could keep you playing for months. But when so much of the experience is based in repetition and familiarity, only the budget price and a personal soft spot for the franchise would make you want to.

Andrew Hayward

★★★

Get used to seeing wave upon wave of similar-looking enemies. "Wait...didn't I just kill you?!"





Special attacks and abilities can be used only when certain conditions are met. Sanctuary, shown here, revives KO'd units but can only be used at the in-game time of noon.

Yggdra Union

One-of-a-kind strategy

PSP PRICE: $39.99 ESRB: Teen
PUBLISHER: Atlus DEVELOPER: Sting

The word "unique" often suffers from overuse, but it's an apt descriptor for *Yggdra Union's* card-based strategy-RPG gameplay. Battles play out across a 2D grid, where you draw from an arsenal of cards that grant your party special abilities and determine how many spaces you can move. Movement is key, as success depends on positioning units in specific formations, or "unions," to team up against multiple enemies. The battles themselves mainly involve waiting for a gauge to fill so you can unleash special attacks, but are remarkably suspenseful nonetheless.

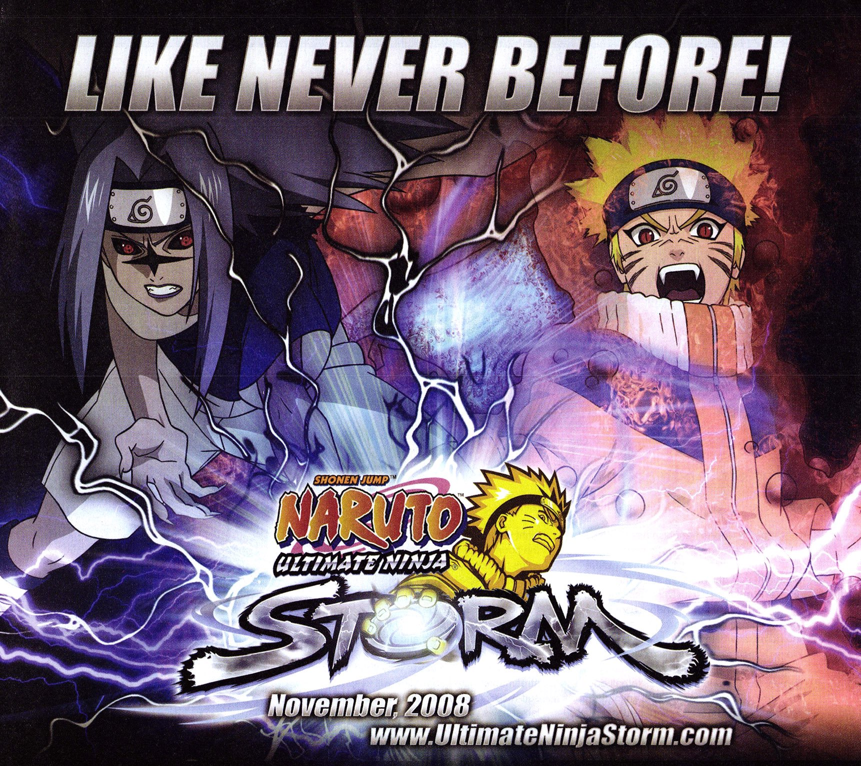
Aspects of *Yggdra* seem hardcore for the sake of being hardcore—the paucity of opportunities to heal and the inability to equip/unequip items at will is irritating, although the difficulty has been scaled back from its original release on GBA. The steep learning curve may put off newcomers, but for those willing to commit to its complexities, *Yggdra Union* offers a truly refreshing strategy experience.

Carolyn Gudmundson

★★★½

Beautiful character art complements battles and story sections alike.

CANCEL
OK
Union Formed!
Ready for combat?
2 -unit
VS
2 -uni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PLAYSTATION 3

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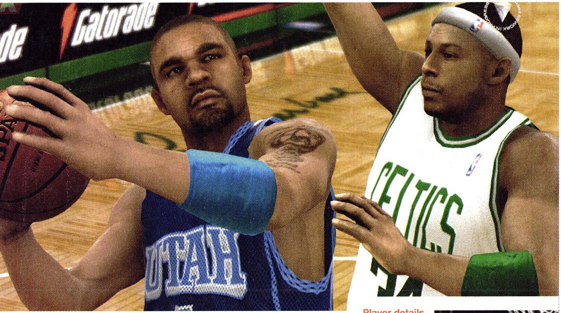


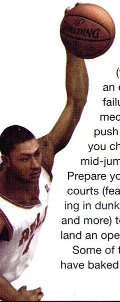
Player details, down to the tats, are pretty amazing.

NBA 2K9

What's it like to be on TV?

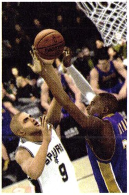
PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: 2K Sports DEVELOPER: Visual Concepts

The 2K Sports franchise has flourished in recent times, and the competition among the basketball games (where competition is still possible since the NBA license is not held exclusively) has elevated the ambition level. The standout here is the TV-style presentation. However you're playing the game, at whatever difficulty level, in single-player franchise mode, in quick games, or online in the promised five-on-five multiplayer games, *NBA 2K9* looks like basketball does on your TV. The crowds are well animated, the players (for the most part) are pretty accurate, and the whole experience screams of being driven around the notion that what you see on TV should be what you play on your PS3.



Of course, a flip side exists, and that disguises itself within the advanced shooting mechanism that (like 2K's *MLB* game) makes what looks like a simple task (throwing up the ball at the basket) an exercise in frustration and regular failure. Another flip side is that this mechanic, whereby you pull back and push forward the right analog stick, lets you change your shot type and angle mid-jump. How expert are you already? Prepare yourself for weeks on the mini-game courts (featuring any NBA star of your choosing in dunk contests, three-point shoot-outs, and more) to get a handle on what it takes to land an open three-pointer.

Some of the visual presentation seems to have baked in the effects oven a little too long (light reflections on the court look like a line beckoning you along a specific path), but the sound effects build the stadium atmosphere and for the most part the commentary is fluid and accurate to what's going on on the floor.



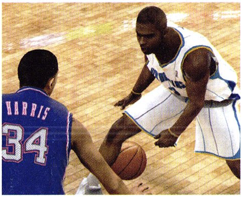
Be prepared to practice the shooting mechanism.

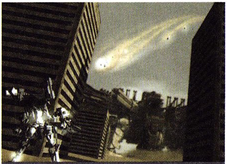
Like *NBA 09: The Inside* downloadable (and streamable) NBA information will keep any self-respecting hoops fan up to date with the latest news and events, and the online play itself should (we hope) develop into a challenging arena for the best skills out there. Just make sure, if you want to be part of that, you take the time to learn all the nuances of the right-stick shot options.

Rob Smith

★★★★

The hi-def presentation and production values are first-rate, with multiple camera angles available.





Don't be fooled by the glossy textures and blur effects. The graphics in *Armored Core: For Answer* become jagged when they're in motion.

Armored Core: For Answer

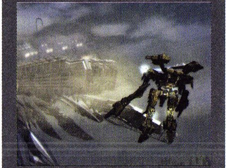
Another uninspired entry in the series that won't die

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Teen
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: From Software

I desperately wanted to like the oddly titled *Armored Core: For Answer* because any game that has giant, customizable robots battling across sprawling, weather-affected environments should inspire me to put away my action figures (my usual medium for mock robot battles) and indulge in some action-packed virtual gameplay. Unfortunately, the game continues the *Armored Core* series' tradition of disappointing—the unresponsive controls are back with a frustrating auto-aim system, a clunky camera, and loads of repetitive missions (including 30 lackluster missions in online co-op).

Wading through text-heavy lists of armor and weapons makes upgrading your mech as much fun as staring at a spreadsheet. And no matter how many lens flares shine in your face, the graphics are still painfully average for a next-gen title.

Tyler Nagata



You can choose to side with The League, the ORCA, or the independent city states.

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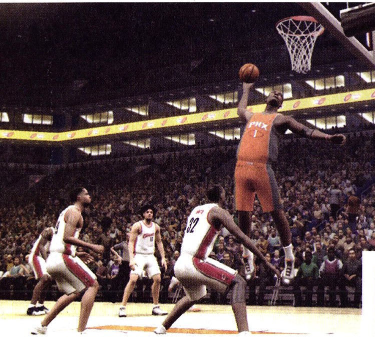
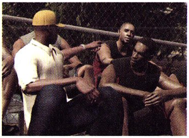


Timing passes to the open player in the lane is key to getting clear dunks. Fadeaways, etc. require holding the shoot button until the power arc turns green.



This is the Life, hanging with your friends, playing in the D-League, and dreaming of making it to the big time.

NBA 09:

The Inside

Living the Life of an NBA star

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: SCEA San Diego

PS3 | R

PSP | R

Keen, clear philosophies define the boundaries between games competing in the same arena. Such is the case with this year's PS3 basketball combatants, with SCEA's version building on the personalization elements (putting yourself in the game), alongside accessible, easily-grasped controls. If you're new to basketball games you'll find the mechanism for finding teammates with passes, hitting lay-ups and slamming dunks, and dropping those fadeaways and deep threes pretty straightforward. Of course, mastering them against the higher of the four AI difficulty levels (or against the experts online) will take significant practice.

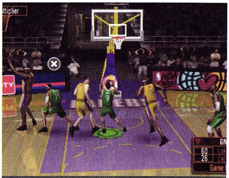
In a sense, that's where *NBA 09: The Inside* comes somewhat unstuck. If you engage in the compelling The Life progression, which tells three separate stories of a point guard, power forward, and shooting guard making it through the D-League (Developmental League) to get to the big dance, life as a budding star gets pretty tough, pretty quick. This Life mode recounts these tales firsthand, through Story modes, but when you need to score assists in a set time limit, it doesn't matter how many experience points you've pumped into your own skills—if your teammates suck, you'll keep failing.

This mode does teach you quickly the offensive and defensive requirements of each position on the court, which will come in real handy when you play a franchise session as your favorite NBA team. Those familiar superstars look pretty decent, and display enough signature moves to give an authentic NBA feel, but even while the real NBA stats are being piped into your game, chances are you'll be working out, working hard, and hoping your teammates don't screw up in the D-League.

Rob Smith

★★★½

You earn career experience points for a huge number of in-game actions, such as hitting a dunk after a crossover or spin, blocking shots, and more.



If you already own *NBA 08*, the changes in *09* might not be enough to warrant an upgrade.

NBA 09:

The Inside

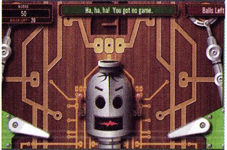
Not quite "Fantastic," but definitely hand-tastic

PSP PRICE: $29.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: SCEA San Diego

Think of the PSP version of *NBA 09: The Inside* as an NBA team that didn't make any major free agent signings in the off-season but added a few depth-enhancing acquisitions to strengthen an already solid core. Despite claims of gameplay and AI refinements, the central play experience looks and feels virtually unchanged from *NBA 08.* The key additions are a Franchise mode and an enhanced lineup of mini-games ranging from all-star weekend events to quests to carnival games and pinball. A new Elimiquest mode is a derivative of the territory-seizing Conquest mode in which team power-ups are earned as your high scorers are removed from the game. It's an acquired taste, but adds another bite-size way to play. While *NBA 09* doesn't transform the franchise into a dynasty, it's still playoff-worthy.

Roger Burchill

★★★½



The plethora of mini-games makes it easy to have fun-on-the-run even when you don't have time for a standard basketball game.

In honor of small ball: The shortest player to ever play in the NBA was Tyrone "Muggsy" Bogues at 5-feet 3-inches. The shortest current player is Earl Boykins at 5-feet 5-inches.

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See inside the creative world that EVERY PS3 owner will play
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MORTAL KOMBAT VS DC UNIVERSE
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GUNS OF THE PATRIOTS
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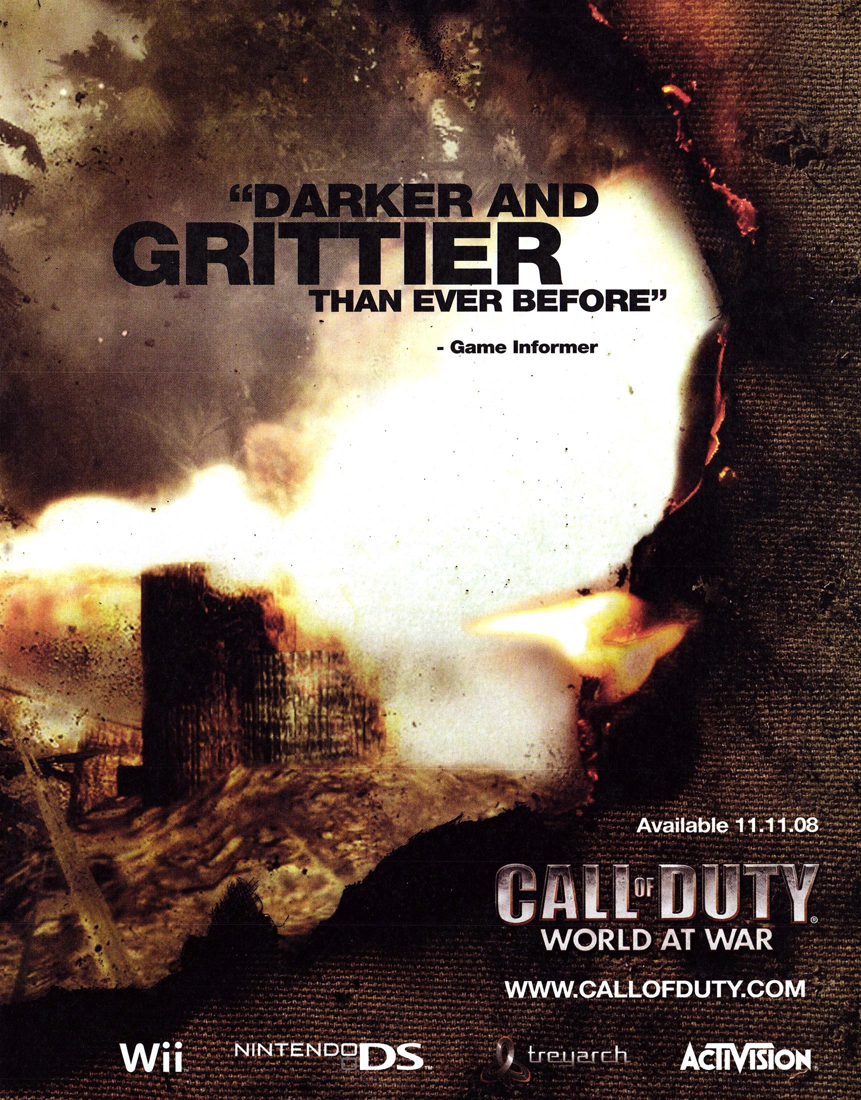
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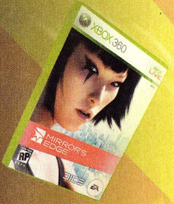
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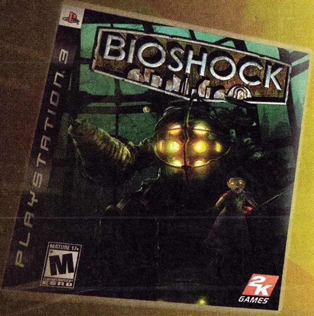
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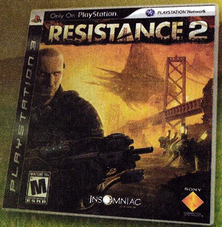
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GAME BOY ADVANCE

That Little Sister won't be the only one crying in Survivor mode.

TROPHY TIME

I CHOSE THE **IMPOSSIBLE**

Take heed: You will die unless you use our insider tips on thriving in Survivor mode!

Need to nab that Platinum Trophy in *BioShock?* In order to unlock the biggest daddy of them all, you'll have to master the game on the toughest difficulty level—the PS3-exclusive Survivor mode—without using a single Vita-chamber. Tougher enemies, less ammo, no extra lives…you're in for quite the challenge. To help, we tapped a trio of pros behind the game to give us their top tips for thriving as a Survivor. Special thanks to Jake Etgeton (senior programmer, UI programmer on *BioShock),* Mathi Nagarajan (2K Australia PS3 lead programmer), and JP LeBreton (2K Marin lead level designer, designer on *BioShock).*

Don't shy away from being a shutterbug. The research camera will help you get the leg up on those nasty Splicers.

Ice is nice if you need to freeze a foe, stopping him in his tracks so you can gun him down while minimizing damage. Winter Blast also works well when snapping photos for your research.

CONSERVE When playing on Survivor difficulty, you really don't want to try to kill everything. Ammo is so scarce that you need to find ways to use the environment and other AIs to help you.

KNOW WHEN TO RUN Setting up traps to weaken enemies is great, but sometimes it's best to just run away if you can.

COMBO MEAL Some combos can deal a lot of damage. Setting AIs on fire and then electrocuting the water they jump into is very effective. Attaching multiple proximity grenades onto explosive barrels and then throwing them at Big Daddies causes a heaping helping of hurt. Setting up rows of trap bolts and getting Big Daddies to charge through them will help weaken them. In general, think creatively about the resources you have at your disposal.

ENVIRONMENT Pay attention to your surroundings! "Environment" and "ecology" are far more effective than they are in other modes, so using the world and other enemies to your advantage will make an enormous difference.

The early levels are probably the toughest. Welcome to Rapture, indeed.

TRAPS Use traps! There are heaps of innovative combinations to take down tough enemies, such as using Telekinesis on a pile of barrels, adding a proximity mine, laying down a target dummy near them, hiding, then hitting a nearby Big Daddy with Enrage. One huge explosion later and you've taken down one of the big guys without firing a single bullet.

USE THAT TOOL Think of new and interesting ways to use the tools in the game. Plasmids, weapons, and items have multiple uses that may not be readily apparent. One example is using Winter Blast to freeze hackable objects, which slows down the flow of the hacking mini-game.

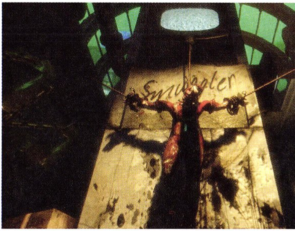
DODGE Try to learn how to dodge attacks! A Big Daddy dash can almost always be avoided, and in later levels it can kill you in one hit.

REVISIT The earlier levels are some of the hardest. If you try to run and gun your way through your first forays into the world of Rapture, you'll be in for a rude awakening. It's often best to wait until you've collected more ADAM and research, then head back to tackle those early Big Daddies with your new powers and skills.

CAUTION Every fight is a decisive, life-or-death struggle. Treat enemies with caution, as a gun-blazing gung-ho attitude will get you slaughtered.

TRY OR DIE Experiment with tactics that get you a lot of damage for as little risk and resources (EVE, ammo, or money) as possible.

ICE, ICE, BABY Use Winter Blast against teleporting or fleeing enemies to prevent them from evading your grasp.



Think you're too good for our helpful tips? So did *that* guy, and, well, you see the results...

It's a long haul to that Platinum Trophy, but you'll earn the envy of all your pals.

BE SNEAKY Oftentimes your best strategy is to avoid conflict altogether. Enemies have limited vision, so use stealth and evasion to your advantage!

A LITTLE TONIC Remember that you can swap out your tonics for free at any Gene Bank at any time. If you're running painfully low on resources, you can cheat the system a bit by loading up on Vending and Crafting tonics, purchasing and creating ammo, then re-splicing your combat-focused loadout.

PHOTO FRENZY Research is key in Survivor. The bonuses you gain from using your camera can turn you from zero to hero. If you're having trouble nabbing those Pulitzer-prize-winning shots without getting a drill to the face, try using Winter Blast or Electrobolt to get your impatient subjects to stand still.

A FRIEND INDEED A Befriended Big Daddy is quite possibly the most lethal weapon in Survivor. Aim to have two Security Bots and a hefty metal friend with you at all times. Remember to always let him get a Little Sister from a vent after he's been heavily damaged fighting for you, then repay his dutiful service with a few rounds of Electric Buck to finish him off and collect the ADAM!

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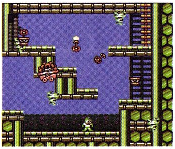
+ YEA You'll get full value for your money.

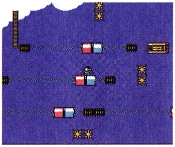
- NAY No legs, no fun, no value.

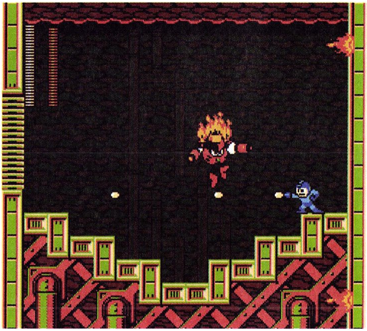
Mega Man 9

PRICE: $9.99 **DEVELOPER:** Capcom

+ Your interest in this old-school throwback is probably directly proportional to your age—the longer you've been gaming, the more likely you are to totally freak out over *Mega Man 9.* It's a tough-as-adamantium-nails platformer with enough one-hit kills and bottomless pits to make even the hardest of hardcore players tear their hair out...but in a good way. What begins as an impossibly frustrating, learn-by-dying experience soon becomes a fiendishly addictive game of rock-paper-scissors. See, each of the game's eight robot bosses are weak against a specific weapon carried by one of the other bosses, so you have to experiment and discover for yourself the proper path to take.







If all that sounds hellishly unpleasant, then pass, definitely. On the other hand, if you're yearning for a game that takes no prisoners, that doesn't care how badly it's breaking your poor wrists, this is pure heaven. It's especially rewarding for all the NES gamers who're still hanging with the industry; this game will certainly rekindle their fond memories of why Mega Man used to be a major, major draw. The impeccable level design, rockin' music, and aforementioned challenge kept millions coming back for more, and the same can be said of *Mega Man 9.*

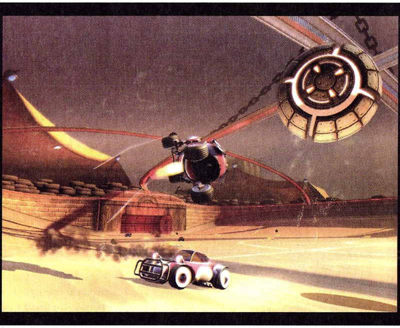
It's not a perfect love letter, though. A now-gen perk like the cutting-edge ability to save your game replaces archaic passwords, yet you're still forced to swap weapons by pausing the game and manually selecting from the pop-up screen. Later *Mega* games let you switch via the shoulder buttons, and that would have been more intuitive than menu surfing. Minor blemishes aside, this is a definite buy for fans and newcomers looking for the next big challenge. But consider yourself warned. Brett Elston

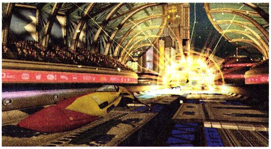
Coming Soon

Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket-Powered Battle-Cars

AVAILABLE: Fall **DEVELOPER:** Psyonix Studios

Whew, it's a mouthful, but *Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket-Powered Battle-Cars* is aptly named: The gameplay encompasses all of those elements. Up to eight players (as many as four per console) can participate in this game of soccer-on-wheels, sliding up walls in their vehicles, flipping through the air, and even rocketing across half the field to defend an oncoming ball headed toward the goal. The game will emphasize multiplayer—but a single-player campaign, a variety of solo mini-games, a slew of obtainable Trophies, and the ability to use your own audio playlist (yes!) should make for a compelling solo jaunt. Teresa Dun



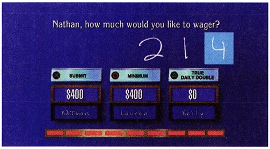


Wipeout HD

PRICE: $19.99 **DEVELOPER:** SCE EUROPE, STUDIO LIVERPOOL

Oh, *Wipeout.* The basic formula hasn't changed since the original, but why should it? Hover-racers tearing around futuristic tracks at breakneck speeds, bombarding opponents with all manner of deadly weapons—it's the very definition of badass and more fun than a new sheet of bubble wrap. This particular edition of *Wipeout* isn't so much a new game as it's a shiny re-packaging of the last two PSP games (subtitled *Pure* and *Pulse),* with every vehicle and the top eight tracks all rebuilt in absolutely gorgeous 1080p. For racing fans that missed those games, this is a no-brainer—but even *Pure* and *Pulse* owners might be compelled to grab it for the slick visuals, custom soundtracks, Trophy support, and online play. Whatever the case, the tracks not only look great but are tons of fun to navigate; moves like barrel rolls help to keep races interesting; and the basic controls perform beautifully even at the highest of the four speed classes (which is insanely fast). Our only real complaint is that the new Pilot Assist mode—which automatically steers you away from the sides of a track—can literally win the race for you, but any contact with the walls when you drive without it grinds you to a halt almost instantly. A happy medium would've been swell, but it's hard to penalize a racing game for being demanding, so buy, practice, and enjoy.

Scott Butterworth

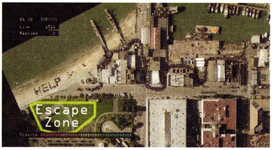

Nathan, how much would you like to wager?

Jeopardy!

PRICE: $14.99 **DEVELOPER:** SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT

With the inclusion of a multiple-choice answer format, the exclusion of Alex Trebek, and the ability to see what your opponents are wagering (and answering!!) in the Final Jeopardy! Round, it's only the music, shiny blue screens, and Daily Doubles that give this game the right to bear the *Jeopardy!* title. You can create up to five character profiles (with limited customization options), and you can play both online and off. But even with some solid trivia, the overall package just feels five to seven bucks too expensive.

Teresa Dun



The Last Guy

PRICE: $9.99 **DEVELOPER:** Japan Studio

Mindless followers who have unconditional faith in you can be *such* a hassle. Sure, all the talk about being a "savior" and the "absolute last hope for mankind" pads the ego, but when the line of terrified citizens snaking behind you reaches over a thousand, it can be tough to navigate them through alley-filled cityscapes without running into the malicious zombies roaming the streets. Each of *The Last Guy's* 15 levels features different zombies (they're really more like creepy, disgusting bugs) that demand certain types of strategies, and levels are literally top-down satellite images of actual cities. For example, a mission in Trafalgar Square requires you to rescue 1,500 citizens within eight minutes while darting past enemies that fog up your screen, reducing visibility. Along the way, you'll find hidden VIPs who offer bonus points. This mixture of *Pac-Man* (collect the citizens, avoid the zombies) and *Snake* (your tail grows longer and longer, and while you can cross your own tail, you definitely don't want the zombies severing your queue) is both challenging and addictive. And I'll admit it: As much of a hassle as they can be, I sometimes wish there were a way to remove the time limit so I could rescue every last one of those poor, directionless bastards.

Teresa Dun

WHAT'S IN STORE

Our favorite downloads from the PlayStation Store this month:

100
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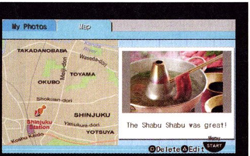
SUPER STARDUST HD TIPS VIDEOS

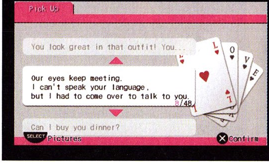
Amusing, useful, and impressive—these videos will either give you hope via their many useful tips... or despair, because you're nowhere near as skilled as the player demoing the tricks. In any case, this pair of free videos is worth watching. The demonstrator's wryly given tips ("and don't die") are astounding in their common sense. We've noticed an improvement in our skills already.

Love in Translation

If you're traveling to Paris, Rome, or Tokyo and can't speak the language, let the *Talk Travel* PSP software (accessible via the PlayStation Store on PS3 and PC) serve as your walking, talking, tour guide and communicator. Each version includes a rudimentary built-in map highlighting the city's most famous tourist attractions, with an option for you to "pin" your own uploaded photos onto the map. The $5.99 package also includes over a hundred common food, souvenir, and sightseeing phrases (with an audio track for you to mimic, though if you're like us, you'll just hand your PSP over for locals to read your question for themselves) along with photos to accompany them.


The Shabu Shabu was great!

But the most impressive feature of *Talk Travel?* It will help you get some "action" from the local hotties! *Talk Travel* comes with around 40 pickup lines that range from sappy ("In a situation like this, this is how you say 'I love you' in English") to direct ("Do you want to come to my place?"). It also includes three mini-games. Fortune for Two promises the two of you wealth or success (but only if you touch or rub two randomly determined body parts against each other). The Massage Detector directs you to "scan" your PSP across your partner's body until a "massage point" is detected. And The Love Match determines whether the two of you have chemistry—but requires you to hug or hold hands for it to operate. Sly little fella, eh?


You look great in that outfit! You...

Our eyes keep meeting.
I can't speak your language,
but I had to come over to talk to you.

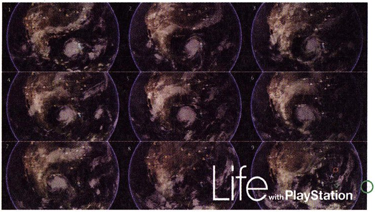
Can I buy you dinner?

Letters Feedback, Insight, Globalization, and Provocative Screenshots

FIRST 13 WORDS FROM A CANADIAN EMAIL WE WON'T BE RUNNING (AND YES, THAT'S ALL WE READ)

"Listen, I know you guys probably won't read this because I'm a Canadian..."

—Robert Laybourne, Canada



WISHFUL THINKING

I thought it would be cool if on the Trophy system, whenever you got a Platinum Trophy you'd get a dollar or some amount of money in your PSN wallet.

Bishop Nelson, via email

"Bishop Nelson"? Is that the best you can do, Rob? We know you're a Brit, but really? Bishop? Nelson? ... Say what? It's not you? Ah, we were sure that our resident Trophy troller was angling to make a tidy profit on the immense lead he has over his PTOM minions. Either way, we've heard that SCEA is mulling over some sort of Trophy reward system. We doubt it'll be cash (or the equivalent), but we suspect it might be exclusive access to early betas and the like.

57353

I just know a great magazine like yours must have a PlayStation Folding team...how can we join?

Jared Files, via email

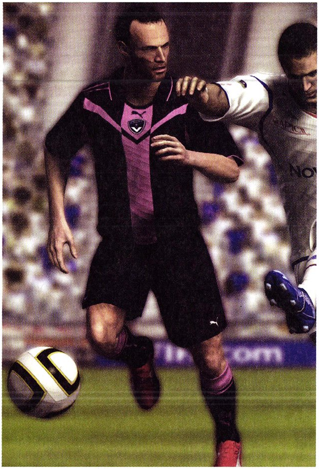
You're absolutely right. A great magazine like ours does indeed have a Folding team! Join up! Our Team ID is 57353! Compare your stats with ours—especially Rob's. He's in 35th place! Our top three Folders are J. VanScyoc, jazzyd971fm, and RuskyBigMusky. You guys rock! And don't forget: With the release of Life with PlayStation, you can now fold while browsing the news and weather from cities around the world!

Famous Faces

In our November issue, we asked you to identify these three authors for a chance to win a copy of *BioShock*. From left to right: George Orwell *(1984)*, Aldous Huxley *(A Brave New World)*, and Ayn Rand *(Atlas Shrugged)*. Congrats to Ryan Lobegrer, who can look forward to a free copy of *BioShock* in the mail!

"... I think my pink jersey adds tenfold to the intimidation factor. Every self-respecting man should own at least one pink keeper jersey." >>

LETTER OF THE MONTH



PINK IS A MANLY COLOR

Commenting on the caption to the *FIFA 09* screenshot on the contents page of the October issue...I've been playing keeper since my growth spurt in my late teens, and I think my pink jersey adds tenfold to the intimidation factor. Every self-respecting man should own at least one pink keeper jersey. There are more to choose from than you might expect, and keepers in green jerseys are a dime a dozen.

Philip Oyer, via email

Our caption was, "It's not pink. It's fuchsia. That's a manly color for a footsy team. And yes, I said footsy! So what?" But now that we look at it again, it's definitely pink.

NAME GAME

Seeing as how the new *Ratchet & Clank* game *Quest for Booty* is coming out soon, I thought it would be appropriate to point out that most of the *Ratchet & Clank* games have hilarious names. I mean, come on: *Going Commando, Up Your Arsenal, Size Matters,* and *Quest for Booty.* I wonder what the next game will be called?

Tyler MacDonald, via email

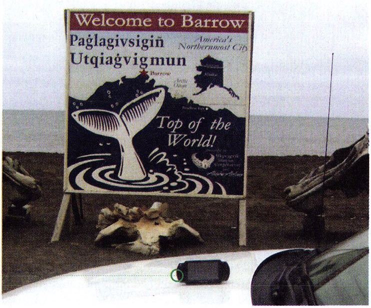
How about *Tyler MacDonald: Master of the Obvious*?

TO PS3 OR NOT TO PS3?

PTOMers, I was reading in the November issue about *Velvet Assassin.* I'd followed that game since it was announced as *Saboteur,* but the game's website doesn't mention a release on PS3. Since you guys previewed it, I was overjoyed that it must be coming, but what's the deal?

Jim Howard, Austin, TX

Funny story. We were told it was on "next-gen" consoles, so that meant PS3. Then we heard it wasn't. Then it was. Now? Well, official word is that it is not, tragically, currently announced for PS3. We couldn't believe it, either. But we'll be sure to update you as, and when, this intriguing stealth action game finds its true next-gen home.



But... Where are the Eskimos?! And the igloos and polar bears? And the Canadians?! And most importantly, where's Santa Claus?! And geez, where's the snow?

PSP WORLD TOUR

I live and work in the state of Alaska. My picture featuring my PSP was taken in the town of Barrow, the northernmost town in the U.S., more than 300 miles north of the Arctic Circle. The only thing north of Barrow is the North Pole. These photos were taken in front of the Barrow Sign near Point Barrow with the Arctic Ocean in the background. Bordering the sign are whalebones. The PSP is on my car hood.

David Reid, Barrow, AK

But where's Sarah Palin, the only other human in Alaska, right? Keep sending your PSP photos to PTOM_Letters@futureus.com!

Will or won't the lovely Violette Summer grace the PS3? We wish the devs would make up their minds...(and pick "yes," of course)!

BACK TALK, SMACK TALK

I've always gotten a kick out of your Letters (hah!) section so I've decided to try to send you a positive note, and (I'm sorry) laugh at some of the "writers" of your November '08 Letters section.

TO SHANE: I'm guessing the word is ThiswordispureevilandisnottobeusedbyanyonebecauseimtiredofseeingitinmagazinesbecauseihavenothingelsetoBEEEPabout." Of course, coming from the Latin term: Bull%*!#

TO THE TWO FLAMERS: "Hah! Hahahahahaha! You think your opinion counts! Hahahahahahahaha!" Ahem. Cough. Etc.

TO ROB HASSINGER: This is why you're on the PTOM staff man! Keep up the good work!

TO ERICH HOLDEN: I understand your pain, but... hackers are inevitable. (*cough* Punkbuster *cough*) Welcome to online gaming.

TO JOSE RIVERA: Um... a winner is you? Sorry for the ranting but I got a locker door slammed into the back of my head today and I'm feeling a bit off. Just wanted to add to your pile of fan mail. Keep up the good work!

P.S. ROB...you're somebody's hero! Keep up the excellent writing.

Scott, via email

contact

Send your thoughts and comments to PTOM_letters@futureus.com. All except you Canadians—you send us back bacon and beer.

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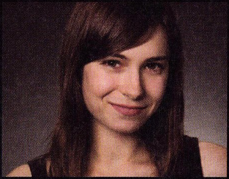


Qore host Veronica Belmont

WE'RE AT IT AGAIN! Not content with providing you with a code to download Episodes 01 to 03, you can now get Episode 04 for free using the code printed below. What will you learn after downloading this latest episode? *LittleBigPlanet* leads this month's showcase of some of the best in PlayStation 3 gaming. So follow the instructions below to use the code and check out what's coming soon:

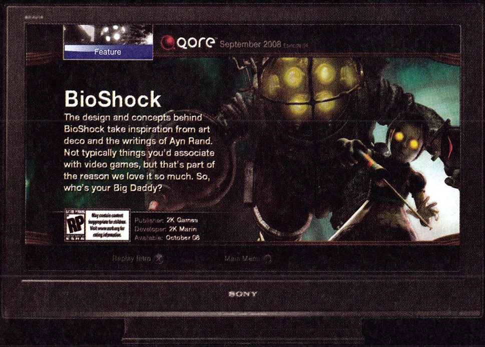
LittleBigPlanet
It's the one we've all been waiting for, both to play and to create. See inside Sackboy's world as he prepares to unleash his unique brand of gameplay on the PlayStation 3. And with this episode of Qore, enjoy an exclusive *LittleBigPlanet* theme to decorate your PS3.

Prince of Persia
What did correspondent Audrey Cleo uncover about the Prince's all-new adventure? Check out her report from inside the development studio at Ubisoft's Montreal office.

BioShock
It may seem like a long time coming, but it's worth it as one of the most celebrated games of the past year arrives on PS3. Veronica visits the new 2K Marin studio handling the PlayStation 3 development, and finds out about the exclusive mode only available on this version. Not to be missed.

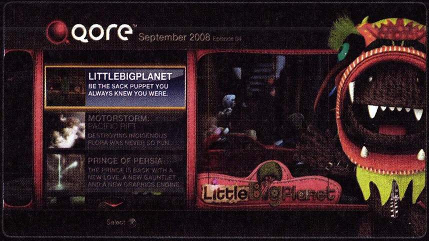
Qore Wars
Remember that whatever you do, don't press L2? That goes double this episode, or you might find yourself facing a challenge beyond your abilities…

Blu-ray Movies
As we head towards the holidays, find out what movies are arriving in stores soon in their pristine Blu-ray glory with a roundup of trailers.


Feature
qore™ September 2008 Episode 04
BioShock
RP
Replay Intro
Main Menu
SONY

The design and concepts behind BioShock take inspiration from art deco and the writings of Ayn Rand. Not typically things you'd associate with video games, but that's part of the reason we love it so much. So, who's your Big Daddy?

Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: 2K Marin
Available: October 08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BE THE SACK PUPPET YOU ALWAYS KNEW YOU WERE.
MOTORSTORM: PACIFIC RIFT
DESTROYING INDIGENOUS FLORA WAS NEVER SO FUN.
PRINCE OF PERSIA
THE PRINCE IS BACK WITH A NEW LOVE, A NEW GAUNTLET AND A NEW GRAPHICS ENGINE
LittleBigPlanet
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Photograph by Mark McGee

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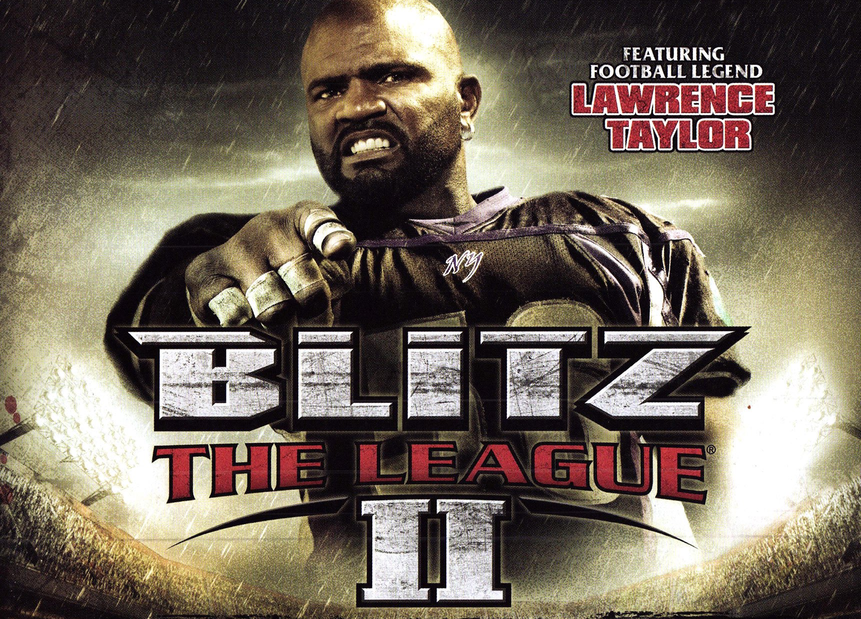

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